

Some beautiful paths can't be discovered without getting lost by Kikinu

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Aged-Up Character(s), And support each other, Basically about friendship first and love second, Developing Relationship, F/M, Friendship, Future Fic, M/M, Mental Health Issues, OT5 Friendship, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Road Trips, The five of them are friends and that's the most important thing, they help each other

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Summary:

Five years later, there's no monsters to kill, but not all monsters are tangible things that you can destroy.

After Will has a particularly bad breakdown, Mike knows they have to do something, *anything*, to make their friend feel better. With the future around the corner and just one year of high school left before everything changes again, the five weirdos of Hawkins High School embark in road trip across the country.

Friendship, love, a lot of food and the knowledge that even in your darkest hours, you will always have someone to hold you.

1. Prologue: Five Years Later

Author's Note:

I love this fic so much <3 I wrote this during NaNoWriMo and it's the first long fic that I finish in YEARS. All the chapters al already written (a prologue, eight chapters and an epilogue) and I'm going to post them on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays (unless something happens, but I'm going to try to stick to that).

Thanks a lot to [hawrthiacoopri](#) for being my beta, and also to my dear and amazing Mamá [TerryMoon](#) for checking the Prologue and to Kammie (que creo que tiene cuenta en AO3, tkm otp) who read the Prologue and the two first chapters. Las quiero, peras <3

It's dark in the woods. Shadows pool around the trees, creating a sea of blackness that grows by the second, swallowing everything in sight. There's no sun, no moon, no stars. There's nothing but darkness and a freezing cold that goes directly to your soul.

It's scary in the woods. He's alone and not at the same time. The trees are dead, the flowers are dead. Is he dead?

No, he isn't. If he were dead he wouldn't notice how alone, how *scared* he is. He wouldn't feel cold and he wouldn't feel pain.

Is he in pain? Yes and no. He's not hurt, but it hurts. *Everything* hurts. Being alive hurts. The darkness filters through his body and he should be dead, but he is not.

Is he still him? He doesn't feel like himself anymore. He feels different and it hurts. Is he breathing? He's alive, so he must be breathing, even though he doesn't feel air in his lungs. Does he feel his lungs? Has he ever felt his lungs?

A chilly breeze goes through the trees, but the leaves don't move.

How could they, if everything is dead? He starts running, afraid, terrified. He runs and runs but he doesn't feel his legs like he normally does. That scares him even more. He tries to cry for help, but he can't. His mouth doesn't work anymore.

Finally, he reaches the lake. Its water is dark in a way water shouldn't be. Can lakes be dead? This one feels dead. *Everything* feels dead. Everything but him.

He approaches the shore and the water is like a dark mirror, but it's not Will Byers that the reflection shows.

It's the Demogorgon.

He wakes up panting and sweating, tears running down his cheeks. He wants to scream, but he knows he can't. His family would wake up and he doesn't want to worry them. Not again.

Shaking, he gets up and tip toes to the bathroom. He throws up all his stomach's contents in the toilet, trying as hard as possible not to make a noise.

He's almost sure he's going to see the Demogorgon when he looks at the mirror, but he doesn't. There's the pale and thin Will Byers, deep and dark shadows under his eyes.

He looks dead.

He isn't, though. He knows that because he is breathing. He checks it and yes, there it is, air going through his lungs. One deep breath in, one out. He closes his eyes, trying to feel his body to make sure he is still himself. That Will Byers is alive and the Demogorgon is dead.

He can feel his heart beating and the aching pain in his back for sleeping in a bad position. He feels the cold floor under his bare feet, the itching of a bug bite in his right elbow, the patch of skin where he burned himself with the stove while cooking yesterday.

He's still a young man, he is not a monster. He is breathing and he is alive.

He is Will Byers, human being.

Mike knows he doesn't need to work, but he works at the art supplies store anyways. He wants to save money, although he doesn't know exactly what for. Maybe for when he goes to college, maybe to buy something cool. He's gonna know when the moment comes, he's sure of it.

It's not a bad job. He works a four hour shift on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays after school and a five hour shift on Saturdays' mornings. The pay is not bad and Mrs. Maraoki, the owner, is a nice and incredible old lady. She lets him read when there are no customers and lets him put whatever music he wants. Also, she lets him take to Will some art supplies for free, that's a big plus.

"Ready, Mike?," Eleven asks him, waving at Mrs. Maraoki talking with a customer.

"Let me go to the back room to get my bag and I'm ready to go."

"I'll wait."

Another plus is that the shop is next to Joe's Diner where Eleven works as a waitress on weekdays. Theirs shifts end off around the same time, so they walk together two blocks to the grocery store where Will works. He finishes half an hour after them, so they use that time to chat or gossip about their classmates. You know, important things.

It's generally him who does the vast part of the talking. Eleven talks more now than she used to when they first met her, but she's still quite quiet. That doesn't mean she isn't a complete gossip, though. Being incredibly quiet, she always ends up listening to lots of conversations their classmates have, so they always know what's happening in their lives. Lucas says it's really sad that the two of them are living through their classmates lives, but he also enjoys the

gossips, so they don't listen to him a lot.

While Eleven tells him all about the scandalous break up of Chris Magallon and Suzanne Arneson, Mike steals a glance at Will, who is still inside the grocery store. The boy looks tired, as he always does nowadays. He smiles to the customers, but Mike knows him well: Will's dead on his feet and just wants to go home.

He has tried to talk to Will, but his friend always evades the topic when Mike brings it up. Will wants everybody to be happy and not to worry about him, so he always tells them he's okay when that's obviously a lie.

Sometimes Mike wishes he could give Will a three hour hug, protect him from everything bad in the world, every monster and evil scientist. But that's part of the issue. Will's problems are not people they can defeat: they're inside his head.

The Demogorgon might be gone, but that doesn't mean it has left Will.

His friend catches his eyes through the glass walls of the shop and gives him a smile that is more real than the one he directs to customers, but tired anyway.

Sometimes Mike feels powerless.

"He's having nightmares again," Eleven tells him and Mike doesn't need to ask to know what she's talking about now. "He tries to be quiet so Joyce and I don't hear him, but I caught him coming out of the bathroom last night. And today he used my concealer to cover his dark circles. He tries to hide it from me so I don't worry, but I know."

Mike clenches his fist, helpless.

"Does Joyce know?"

"I don't think so. If she noticed, she hasn't said anything to me. Do you think they ever stopped? The nightmares."

Mike shakes his head. "I don't think so. I think he's getting really tired and that's making it hard for him to keep hiding it as well as

before.”

Eleven nods and they both watch in silence as Will goes to the backroom of the grocery store to change and grab his things. After a moment, she talks again.

“I hate this. Why can’t we be happy? Why can’t we be *normal*?,” she asks, her voice breaking a little at the end.

And not for the first time Mike wants to cry out of frustration. It’s not fair. Eleven is right. Why can’t they be happy for one time? Why can’t the monsters leave them alone? Haven’t they had enough? Hasn’t *Will* had enough? Hasn’t Eleven?

“Everything is going to be fine,” he promises, taking her hand and squeezing it. “We’re going to fix this. We’re going to find a way, you’ll see.”

Eleven gives him small smile, squeezing back and then they hear someone clearing their throat. When they look, they find Will at store’s door, smirking at them.

“Am I interrupting something?,” the boy asks, giving them an exaggerated wink.

Mike snorts and Eleven rolls her eyes, shaking her head.

“Yes, actually. I noticed that Mike is actually the love of my life. Oh, Mike, will you take me back?,” she implores without any inflection in her voice, taking Mike’s both hands in hers.

“Jesus, Eleven, you’re right. I don’t know why we broke up. You’re the only one I want. Please, let’s elope!,” he says, hugging her tight. They start to make over the top kissing noises and Will can’t take it anymore, so he ends up giggling.

“Gosh, you’re two idiots,” he laughs, getting in the middle and putting one arm over each of their shoulders.

Will is barely taller than Eleven, but Mike has almost a head over them, so Will has to go on tiptoe to be able to reach him.

They walk like that for about five minutes, until Will trips over his own feet and they almost end on the ground. They end up laughing and chasing each other across the street, the people of Hawkins giving them disapproving looks.

They're going to make things better. They deserve it.

Sometimes, Eleven thinks she and Will are going through the same path, but backwards.

Eleven came from darkness: she was a machine made for conquering and destroying. She wasn't supposed to feel anything, her sole purpose in life was to serve as a tool in a war. Against Russia first, against the supernatural later.

She didn't know freedom, she didn't know love or friendship, she didn't even know family. She only knew solitude, pain and fear. White walls. Cold floors. Empty hallways.

When she was forced to break the wall that connected with the Upside Down, that changed. She made friends, she discovered colors and delicious food, and movies, and music, and makeup, and bicycles. She found a family.

She has come a long way. Now, she knows what "friend" means. She knows "promise" and "joke" and "brunch". She also knows "grounded", after a prank war with Dustin in which she and Lucas accidentally set on fire the vice principal's toupee.

Eleven came from darkness, but now she is in a place of light.

Will came from light, but now he is in a place of darkness.

She wonders, sometimes, how Will used to be before the Demogorgon. Was his smile brighter? His eyes more vivid? His laugh more sincere? Mike assures her that Will was pretty much the same, that Will is the same just a little more tired. Mike also has a huge blind spot regarding Will, so she doesn't believe him much.

“He is pretty much the same,” Lucas told her once. They were both playing in his NES and eating ice cream, the project they had to make for school forgotten on his desk. “But he has changed, that’s true. It’s like... it’s like something was taken from him, you know? Like... I don’t know, he was always the more innocent of the four. It sounds cheesy, but I guess he was the most pure of us. And now...”

He stopped then. Eleven put an arm over his shoulders, trying to comfort him, but it was useless.

That was a year ago and Eleven still wonders the same. The thing is, in some sad way, Will is *still* the most pure of them all. He doesn’t like lying, he’s always trying to make everybody else feel better, he helps even those who have hurt him before. He does feel things as envy and jealousy, of course, but he doesn’t let those things take over him. He thinks that, deep down, there’s kindness in everyone.

Which makes his situation even worse.

Will has nightmares almost every night. He forgets to eat, and sometimes to drink too. Even though both of them have to go once a week to Hawkins National Laboratory, Eleven tests and sessions last under an hour, while Will sometimes has to stay for hours on end. He sometimes has to go a second time because they didn’t have enough time the first one.

Eleven has nightmares too, of course. *All of them* have nightmares. She dreams of being a experiment again; Joyce dreams of getting her children taken; Mike of the Demogorgon eating Will and Holly; Hopper dreams of not getting to the Upside Down in time.

Dustin nightmares are usually of Eleven evaporating after saving them, while Lucas’ are of him not being quick enough to tell them that Brenner is going after them. Nancy dreams of Barb, of course; Jonathan of his mom being killing by Brenner in front of him; Steve of the Byers’ house burning with Nancy and Jonathan still inside.

They all have nightmares, they always will. You can’t go through hell and come back unscathed. But there’s a difference between most nightmares and Will’s: when they wake up, even if they anxious or sad or terrified, they know it’s over. They know that it was a

nightmare, that they're back in their beds and that they're not in danger.

Will doesn't.

Eleven doesn't know to what degree Will still feels inside the nightmares when he wakes up. Of all of them, she is the one who knows the most about these episodes, in part because they live together, in part because Will feels that she's the one who can understand him best. That doesn't mean, of course, that Will tells her everything.

When the nightmares are too bad and Will wakes up still feeling the Demogorgon skin over his, he goes to wake up Eleven. She helps him shower without him getting himself hurt, repeating over and over that he's okay, that he is safe, that he is Will and the Demogorgon is dead, that the skin covering his body is human and not the one of a monster.

She supposes it should be awkward and weird that they end up showering together at ungodly hours in the morning, but they're almost like brother and sister. And, besides, one thing she's never going to understand is the obsession that humans have of making every interaction between a male and a female sexual. Sure, Will is like his brother, but if Lucas or Dustin or even Mike were in Will's situation, she would do the same.

But waking up feeling the Demogorgon is not Will's only problem. She wishes it were, but it's not. Because Will's nightmares don't only occur when he's sleeping, no. They also happen when he's wide awake.

It's more difficult to make him feel better when he's having hallucinations of being back in the Upside Down; of seeing the Demogorgon across the street; of slugs coming out of his mouth. She's not the only one that helps in those situations, because they're harder to hide. Actually, Mike is usually the one who's next to Will when this happens, talking to him in a soft voice, waiting for the permission to touch him, helping him come back to reality.

But what must be the worst of all is that Eleven *knows* Will hides

more than what he lets on. How many times has he hallucinated without telling them? How many times has he woken up in the middle of the night and cried himself back to sleep without waking her or Joyce or Jonathan up? How many times has he made himself bleed while scrubbing his skin too roughly, trying to erase every part of the Demogorgon from himself? What other things is he going through without telling them?

Before escaping the laboratory, Eleven didn't know how to communicate with people. Now she knows and she tries her best to always let people know what's going through her mind.

Before being abducted by the Demogorgon, Will knew how to talk to people. Now he's hiding how he feels and doesn't seem able to tell people what exactly is going through his mind.

Sometimes, Eleven thinks she and Will are going through the same path, but backwards. They started on opposites ends of the road, but now they're in some sort of middle ground.

Sometimes, Eleven is terrified of what's gonna happen if they end on opposite sides again.

When he wakes up after a dreamless night in the last day of school, he has a bad feeling. Don't get him wrong; he likes being able to sleep the whole night without waking up crying at three in the morning, but that's not something that usually happens.

He wakes up to the smell of waffles and maple syrup and he runs to the kitchen, where Jonathan and Eleven are setting up the table.

"Jonathan!," he exclaims, running to hug his brother.

"Hi, little brother," Jonathan greets, hugging him tight.

"When did you get here?"

"A couple hours ago. Nancy and Steve picked me up from school yesterday afternoon and we drove all night."

“He missed us,” adds Eleven, smiling softly.

Jonathan chuckles.

“Yes, I did. Come and join the hugging siblings.”

Eleven goes and that’s how Joyce finds them, the three of them hugging and laughing. His mom seems jubilant to have all her children at home and they start making plans to go and eat something out for dinner.

“We can invite Lucas, Dustin and Mike, too,” proposes his mom, smiling.

“Yes!”

“Can Nancy and Steve come?”

“Of course, Jonathan. They’re family too.”

“What about Chief?,” asks an innocent Eleven, purposely not looking at Joyce, which makes difficult for Will not to laugh.

Joyce rolls her eyes, but still smiles. “That old man can come, too.”

It’s been a while since all of them were together and Will is excited. School is ending, the whole summer ahead for them to enjoy, his family at least reunited.

It all seems too good to be true.

He starts seeing shadows from the corner of his eye at second period. When he turns there’s nothing there, but his heart starts to beat faster and he knows he is getting paranoid.

At lunch time, the building around him starts to shift. Everything seems darker, poisonous bindweeds creeping through the walls up to the ceiling. Dustin talks to him about all the food they’re going to eat tonight and Will smiles and tries to keep his breath even. He doesn’t eat anything, but luckily his friends don’t notice.

By fifth period, spores are floating in the air and slugs are crawling

over his classmates' bodies. Mr. Pike, his math teacher, slowly starts to look deteriorated. His skin looks paler and his face cadaveric. He looks dead. Everything looks dead.

Everything but him.

It's hard, but he make it to his Biology class. It's last period, less than an hour left and he's free to go. He just needs to keep going and he will be out of here. He will walk to work with El and Mike and later Lucas and Dustin will pick them up in Lucas' mom car and they will go have dinner at *The Nifty Garden* and everything will be fine and...

When there's just five minutes left, his skin starts to change.

He hurries out of the classroom and someone is yelling his name, but he doesn't listen. He's not at his version of Hawkin's High School anymore, he's in the Upside Down and he's dying. No, it's worse, he's...

He reaches the boys bathroom and starts throwing up in the toilet, slugs coming out of his mouth. He's crying and shaking and he hears the Demogorgon breathing, its voice calling him, asking him to join him, telling him that he is not going to be Will Byers anymore, that from now on he is...

"Will"

Like a lost echo, Mike's voice reaches his ears. He turns, but Mike isn't there. There's no one there, he's alone. He's always going to be alone from now on. He's a monster, who cares about monsters?

"Will, please, listen to me. You're here, with me."

"Mike?," he croaks, unable to stop shaking.

"Yes, Will, it's me. The Demogorgon it's gone, I swear. You're still in school, you're not in the Upside Down."

"Mike, I can't see you," he cries.

He's scared. Where's Mike? He can hear his voice, but he can't see him. Mike tells him he's not in the Upside Down, but he *is*, he can see

it around himself. Why can he hear Mike voice? Is... Is Mike in the Upside Down too? No, no, no! Mike can't be here, the Demogorgon is going to kill him.

Please, don't let the monster kill Mike.

"Will, you're not in the Upside Down and neither I am. Listen to me, ok? Please, close your eyes and just listen to my voice. Trust me."

Trust him? Trust Mike. He can do that. Even when losing himself, he can still trust Mike.

He closes his eyes, trying not to cry anymore.

"That's it, perfect. Just listen to my voice. You're still in school, with me, I *swear*."

"But I..."

"I know," Mike stops him, "I know. But it's not real. Do you hear me? It's not real. Will, I'm going to take your hand, ok? It's not Brenner, it's not Wilkes, it's not the Demogorgon. It's me, Mike. Is that okay? Can I hold your hand?"

He's scared, but he trusts Mike.

"Okay."

Will feels warm fingers intertwining with his. He wants to cry again, but he doesn't. Trust Mike, trust Mike.

"That's my hand. Do you feel it? Do you know why you should be sure of it?"

"Because... because... *oh*. Warm fingers. You're... you are warm. Humans are warm when they're alive."

Mike's warm. Mike's alive. Mike's with *him*.

"Exactly. Will, I'm going to hug you now, is that alright?"

He wants to cry again, but this time not because of fear.

“Yes, *please*.”

Mike is hugging him in less than a second, warm arms enveloping him. Will doesn't feel completely safe yet, but he holds on to Mike like a lifeline. He buries his head in Mike's chest without opening his eyes, still scared of what he's gonna see.

“That's it, that's it. You're doing *great*. I'm warm, you feel it? I'm alive, just like you. We're alive and we're home, we're in Hawkins. The Demogorgon is gone. You're safe. You're here, with me.”

He trusts Mike, he trusts him. Mike would never lie to him, ever. But how can he be sure? How can he be sure that he's not really in the Upside Down if everything is so similar to there?

He feels a warm embrace, but if he opens his eyes he just sees death and rotting plants. Why is he so fucked up? Why can't he be normal again?

Why does he bother Eleven at three in the morning when he can't sleep? Why does he make his tired mother work overtime to pay for food that he's not even going to eat? Why does he make his friends organize their schedules around him so he's never alone? Why does he drag Mike with him in all the horrible things the people in town say about him?

He's poisonous to people around him. He's a monster.

“Will, please, just listen to my voice, okay? I know you're scared, but *please* just listen to me. I don't know what you're thinking, I don't. Please, Will, *please*, talk to me,” Mike begs him and Will is a terrible, terrible friend.

“I can't,” he says.

“Yes, yes you *can*. You're doing it right now. You're capable of lots of thing, amazing things. Right now I just ask you to talk to me, just that. I can't help you if you don't tell me what's happening, Will.”

Trust Mike, trust him.

“I...” he starts, swallowing. Mike tightens his embrace and Will tries

his hardest to continue, "I don't know where I am anymore. I know you're here with me, I *feel you* here with me, but I... I don't..."

He chokes on a sob and he's so angry and sad and scared. Why can't he talk like a normal person? Why can't he stop crying like a dumb baby? Why is he so useless?

"Will, is okay, I'm still here. Keep talking, please. I'm not letting you go, I swear."

"Mike, is like I'm still there. All the time. Even when I don't see the Upside Down around me, I'm still there. Even though here everything is brighter, more alive, everything is so similar to there and I... I can't breath. Please, Mike, please..."

"What? What, Will? Please, tell me what can I do," Mike implores him, desperation I'm his voice.

"Please, get me out of here."

"Get you out of... here? Out of school?"

"No. Out of *Hawkins*," he finally says and he's crying again and he's a monster and they shouldn't have brought him back.

Mike doesn't let go of him, though. Mike caresses his hair and hugs him and doesn't let him slip deeper into his own thoughts.

"I'm gonna take you out of here, I swear. But now I need you to do something for me, okay? I need you to hear my voice and open your eyes. I'm here, with you. Okay?"

He feels Mike forehead bumping softly against his, his breath against his own. Trust Mike, trust him.

"Okay."

When he open his eyes, the first thing he sees is Mike's eyes. They're brown and beautiful and sad.

"Hi," Mike tells him, a soft smile in his lips.

Will sobs pathetically, but his friend doesn't seem to care.

“Hi.”

Mike hugs him tight again and then Will notices that they're not alone in the bathroom. Eleven, Lucas and Dustin are there, too, the three of them looking sad and angry in varying degrees. They smile at him, though.

“I'm sorry,” he tells them, and he's sobbing again, feeling like a pathetic child trapped in a dying world.

Lucas is the first to joining them, followed quickly by Dustin and Eleven. They're a weird lot: the freaks of Hawkins' High School. They're all fucked up to some degree, Will knows that, but he also knows that they wouldn't as bad if it wasn't for him.

“I'm sorry,” he repeats, his voice muffled by Lucas' arm.

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” Dustin tells him and he too sounds about to cry.

“We're taking you out of here,” Mike promises, his voice resonating through the empty bathroom, “I swear it. We're taking you out of here.”

And Will trusts him. He always will trust Mike.

2. Chapter 1: You raze the old to raise the new

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks to everyone who leave a comment in the last chapter <3

Chapter's title taken from *North of Beautiful*, by Justina Chen.

Tilda Maraoki moved to Hawkins fifteen years ago after her husband passed away. She would like to say that she misses Howard, but the son of a bitch is better off dead.

In Hawkins, Tilda rebuilt her life. She bought a white picket fence house, adopted two cats and a dog and bought the C10 '68 Chevy she always dreamt about, with double cabin and everything. She set up an art supplies shop which she managed alone for fourteen years, until two winters ago she hurt her hip and needed to hire an assistant.

That's when she met Mike Wheeler.

She already knew of Mike Wheeler, of course. Everyone in town knows about the Wheeler siblings, the Byers family, Lucas Sinclair, Dustin Henderson. Everybody knows about them, but everybody also shut ups and plays dumb, as if for the last five years terrible things hadn't been happening in Hawkins.

Tilda lived in New York City for fifty eight years, but the weirdest things she saw were here in Hawkins, Indiana. And she saw really disturbing things in New York.

When Mike came to her shop asking if he could work there, Tilda wasn't fast enough to say yes. How could she deny him, when the reason they're all alive and breathing was that boy and his friends?

Mike is an impeccable employee, too.

Tilda never had the best parental instinct, which made her even more surprised to found how much of a soft spot she has for this group of

kids. They're so noble and smart, so brave and adventurous. The five of them always contrasting with the rest of town.

Maybe Eleanor is her favorite. El doesn't talk too much and seems to be even more socially awkward than her brother and her friends, but there's something in her eyes that make Tilda remember herself at a young age.

Of course, Tilda didn't fight monsters and made things float when she was seventeen, but that's the Byers siblings for you.

It will never stop astounding her how Hawkins turns a blind eye in all the magnificent and terrifying things these kids do. Sure, it's hard to accept that your hometown is being haunted by monsters and controlled by evil government agencies, but everything has a limit. To Tilda it was seeing Lucas Sinclair save her cat, Asshole, from an eight feet monster. By cutting its head. With a *machete*.

So, yes, she has a soft spot for these kids. And if not for that, at least because it's hard not to have one when Will Byers looks at you with those big brown eyes. That's the reason why she lets Mike give him some supplies. That and the fact she thinks they're cute.

Also, Will is a fellow artist, and a pretty talented one.

Given all that, she's a little worried, to say the least, when that Friday she sees Mike entering the shop looking on the verge of tears.

"Kiddo, what happened?"

"I... it's... Will is..." his voice breaks, then, and Tilda might not be a touchy feely person, but she gives that boy the big hug she knows he's needing.

"I'm sorry," apologizes Mike, hugging her back.

"Nothing to be sorry about, kiddo. Wanna talk about it? Or is one of those things we all play dumb?"

"A little of both," Mike confesses, putting a little distance between them and giving her a sad smile.

“Let's talk about what you can talk about, then.”

Mike doesn't tell her right away. He looks at the door, blinking a lot and still trying not to cry. Then he goes to the backroom to leave his things there. He drags his feet over the floor, slumped shoulders and clenched fists.

Yesterday he couldn't stop talking about all the things he and his friends had planned for the summer and now...

She has always known life is unfair, that's nothing new. But she wishes these kids could at least have a break.

Mike comes back, looking anywhere beside her and starts talking.

“It's just... Remember I told you Will sometimes is a little... um... overwhelmed by things? Because that time he went missing and... stuff.”

Stuff. Right.

“Yes. I remember that time I had to drop you and Eleanor at their house because he was alone and having a panic attack. Did he have one today?”

“Yes. Kind of. It's just... It's not that we hate the town, you know? It's our home, but... all the horrible things that we lived here... and especially for Will is...” Mike sighs, shaking his head. “He wants to get away from here. I promised him that I'm going to take him out of here, but I don't have a clue how to it.”

Tilda can relate to wanting to get away from somewhere. That's what brought her to Hawkins in the first place.

“Well, a good way is with a car. They're fast, so you can cover more miles in less time,” she suggests. Mike snorts and gives her a smile. It's small, but is something. “See? Now you're smiling. That's good. But I'm serious with the car thing.”

Mike shakes his head, taking a cloth from under the counter. He starts to clean the shelves, always an exceptional employee.

"I don't have a car. And where would I take him? I mean, sure, we could drive to Indianapolis or Chicago, but that's really close. We could be back in a day or two, too. I think he wants something more... I don't know if permanent, but a little longer? And with more distance from home. Or... I don't know," Mike sighs, going to the next shelf. There's frustration in his voice, and sadness too. It has to be hard to be so young and have so many contradicting feelings. Suddenly Mike laughs, but he doesn't sound happy at all, "To be fair, I'm guessing half the things. He doesn't talk a lot about what he's feeling. Honestly, I'm even surprised he told me that much today. I wish... I wish I could do more, you know? But I'm ordinary and powerless."

He sniffs and his shoulders slouch even more, if that's possible. The irony in all this? Mike doesn't talk a lot about what he is feeling, either. And it's not just because Tilda is her boss and maybe they're not that close (which is not the case), because she has heard his friends telling him to open up a little more. This is the longer Mike has talked to her about how he feels since... since they know each other, to be honest.

These kids have done so much for this town and they're so sad all the time, she has to do at least a little bit to help them.

"Why don't you take my truck?"

"What?," asks Mike, looking confusedly at her.

"You can take my truck. To travel, I mean. Take Will and your friends on a trip. It's summer vacation, you don't need to go to school."

The kid gapes at her like one of those fish in Doctor Foster's tank and if it weren't because this is not the moment, she would laugh.

"But... but the job...!"

Tilda scoffs, waving her hand at him.

"I can manage a couple of months alone. My hip is better and your job is going to be here for you when you come back. And, between you and me? Joe and Mr. Monroe are going to do the same for

Eleanor and Will if they ask them.”

Mike chews on his lips, fidgeting with the cloth in his hands.

“But... you love your truck.”

“I also love you, kiddo. Nah-ah, don't let it go to your head,” she adds after seeing his face break in a big smile.

“You're the best, Mrs. Maraoki,” he says, letting go of the cloth on the counter and giving her a tight hug.

“I already told you that you can call me Tilda. Now, you already have transportation. You only need to figure out where to go.”

A woman enters the store and Mike goes to help her, his “customers smile” on. He's a good kid, they all are. She hopes they find what they're looking for.

Will was late for work but Mr. Monroe didn't chew on him too much. Will supposes he looks too pathetic for his boss to get mad at him.

That's unfair, Mr. Monroe is a nice man. He gave Will a job, that says a lot. The vast majority of Hawkins doesn't want the local weirdo within three hundred yards of them, so to be given a job is a lot. Besides, Mr. Monroe is always kind to him when Will has one of these episodes.

Sure, Mr. Monroe doesn't know exactly what the episodes are actually about, but everybody on this town likes to ignore as hard as possible what happen to Will and his friends.

Luckily, it's a calm day. Not a lot of people come to the store and, by quarter past five, Will isn't seeing bindweed climbing the walls. He still sees shadows through the corner of his eye, but he repeats to himself Mike's words like a mantra.

It's not real. You're here. You're with them. You're home.

By the time his shift is done he's completely exhausted. He slept next to nothing last night and with the hallucinations at school and his shift, he's dead on his feet. He doesn't know how he's going to pretend to be cheerful and happy at dinner.

"I already cleaned the toilet, Mr. Monroe. If it's good with you, I'm gonna get going."

"Of course. Have a nice weekend, Will," Mr. Monroe tells him, giving him an envelope with his pay. "And try to sleep a little."

"Thanks, Mr. Monroe. Have a nice weekend too."

Outside his friends are waiting for him. They're in front of Lucas' mom's car, the four of them talking in a circle with hushed voices. Lucas, Eleven and Dustin are looking focusedly at Mike, who's the one doing most of the talk.

This is probably about what happened at school and Will almost wants to go back to the store and ask Mr. Monroe for extra hours. He doesn't want to be treated like a baby who needs someone to hold his hand every time he's scared. Which is terrible, because he is actually scared and disturbed a great part of the time.

"Oh, Will, you're ready!," exclaims Dustin, making the others turn around.

"Yeah. What are you talking about?"

He's expecting nervous looks exchanged between his friends, like always happens when they talk about his condition behind his back. What he gets, regardless, is an excited Dustin taking him by the arm and bringing him to the middle of the round.

"Tell him, Mike!"

Mike smiles at him, happier than Will has seen him in weeks. He doesn't know what's going on, but he can't help and smile back, that's the effect that smiles has on him.

"We're going on a road trip."

“What?”

“Mrs. Maraoki is going to lend me her truck. We can be out of here for two months and be back in time for the new school year.”

His friends look at him, thrilled, and Will chuckles nervously, not knowing what else to do.

“What are you talking about?”

“You said you wanted to get out of here, right? We’re gonna take you out of here!,” Mike tells him and Will feels too moved to say anything else. He feels Eleven taking his hand and squeezing it and Will squeezes back. “I know. We need to talk to our parents and to your bosses and with the people at the Lab. But we’re doing this, okay?”

“But... the money...” Will babbles, a thousand thoughts going through his mind.

“We all have money saved,” interjects Lucas, “Dustin and I from our allowances and the times we helped the Lincolns mow their lawn. Mike has been saving almost all his payments since he started working with Mrs. Maraoki two years ago. And I know you and El help your mom, but since those assholes at the Lab give you two an allowance, you too have a little to spare. We can have this,” promises the boy and he sounds so sure that Will really wants to believe him.

“We have to go to the Lab once a week for tests. They’re not going to let us go away for two months.”

“Won't they?” asks Dustin, grinning. “They told you that maybe you can go to college. We can say this is a trial test.”

“Will,” says Eleven, squeezing his hand again. “We’re going to do this. For you. And for us.”

He feels his throat closing up, his eyes burning with tears. He’s used to that feeling. What he’s not used to is being overjoyed as the reason as to why he is feeling this way.

Will opens his mouth, but he can’t talk. He’s overwhelmed by his friends’ actions and all the events of the day and the only thing he

wants to do right now is hug them forever.

They're amazing friends, the best that he could ever have. They never gave up on him, even when they were sure he was dead. They have been there for him through all the shit that have happened in his life, just being a hand to held or the lifeline to grab to. They listen to him and talk when he doesn't want to think; they joke with him; play with him; dream with him. Will is a weirdo for more than one reason, but they don't care for a single one of them.

Sometimes, Will think he loves them so much his heart is going to explode.

He clears his throat, eyes watering but holding back the tears.

"So, where are we going?"

The grins on his friends faces grow bigger.

"That's the best part," claims Lucas.

"Tell him, Mike," says Dusting, elbowing the boy.

Will looks expectant to Mike, who just grins at him.

"We're going to the Comic-Con."

Will can't help from laughing out of joy, all his friends hugging him and each other at the same time.

He might not know where he is the vast majority of time, he might not know how long until his next panic attack. Will Byers lives in a world of uncertainty but there's one thing he can be sure of: he'll always have his friends.

Lucas will never stop getting surprised by Joyce Byers.

He was expecting Joyce to freak out at least a little bit. Everyone is overprotective of Will, sure, but Joyce is the number one offender.

She always accompanies Will and Eleven when they have to go to the Lab; sews costumes at ungodly hours in the morning so Eleven can participate in the school plays; checks on them every couple hours when they stay at Mike's, Lucas' or Dustin's houses.

Joyce always is making sure her kids are okay and close to her, even Jonathan who is studying in New York. Lucas would have expected her to start yelling that in no way Will and Eleven are going to go on a two month trip to California.

What does happens, instead, is that Joyce looks *ecstatic*.

"That sounds amazing!," exclaims the woman.

"Really? You are okay with it, mom?," asks Will, smiling widely.

"Of course! I always wanted to drive across the country, it seems like so much fun. I'm sure you kids are going to have a lot of fun. How nice of Mrs. Maraoki to lend you her car, Mike."

Mike smiles at Joyce, who smiles back. At moments like this, Lucas can't help thinking that she's a beautiful woman. Which is kinda weird because she's old and his best friends' mom.

It's nice to be reunited with all the gang. Which, talking about weird things, is extremely strange to call "the gang" to a group made of his friends, three college students in a relationship Lucas prefers not to question, two of his friends' mom and the Sheriff. But this is his life and Lucas already came to terms a long time ago with the fact that weird is his new normal.

"I want you to call me as much as you can, though," continues Joyce, "I want to make sure that the five of you are okay. I'm going to really miss you, but if this is important for you, I'm okay with it."

"I'm gonna check Mrs. Maraoki's truck before you go," interjects Hopper, which Joyce seems to approve. "And we're gonna see what route you're gonna take and make sure it's safe. I know accidents can happen, but the less surprises the better, right?"

They're a diverse lot and maybe that's the reason why they all feel so comfortable around each other.

Being one of the few black kids in town, Lucas has always felt like an outsider. He's not like his classmates, as Troy likes to remind him on a daily basis. Lucas doesn't have a problem with the color of his skin, but sometimes he would like to see more people that look like him.

A thing he loves about his family (not his blood related family, the family he made on his own) is that they don't make a difference because of his looks. They're not "colorblind", like a lot of people say on TV. They see him as he is and yet it doesn't make any difference. He can be himself, because there's nothing wrong with who he is and *they know it*.

Being different is a feeling they all know. They're all outsiders in their own way. That being said, he always thought that Will (and now Eleven) is lucky to have his mom. Joyce always hears them, never treated them like just some little kids, not even before Will went missing. She's overprotective and a little messed up in the head, but she always tries her best and makes sure her kids don't miss anything.

Lucas' parents are not bad parents. They're not exactly good, either. They both have good jobs and are in love and he guesses that's good. His parents never wanted to have children, too, and that's where things start to get a little uncool.

His parents pay for all his things, give him money to buy comics and games, make sure he always has good clothes and food for school. They do the basics and Lucas knows, he *really* knows that he should be grateful because there are parents who don't even do that, but...

His parents are almost never home and, when they are, they don't talk to him. They go on holidays without him so he stays with his grandmother who is cool, but also old and with bad memory. They always give him money for Christmas and his birthdays and is cool to be able to buy what he wants, but he also wants a gift that was especially chosen for him.

God, his parents don't even realize what's going on with his life. All the times he sneaked out of home in the middle of the night, all the times he was about to die, all the times he had to fight and run and *kill*. His parents don't know, never talked to him long enough to find

out.

Sometimes he feels petty for thinking that at least he doesn't have Mike's parents, who know but prefer to pretend like they don't, to keep the normal life charade going on. Lucas is pretty sure that if his parents knew what's going on with his life, they would be concerned. After all, they might not be good parents, but they aren't bad ones either.

"Lucas, are you okay?," Joyce asks him, worried.

"Oh, sure. Sorry, I spaced out for a second. What were you saying?"

"I asked you if you want the olives in my slice of pizza," offers Joyce, showing him the olives in her pizza.

"Man, why does Lucas always gets the olives?," protests Dustin, chewing with his mouth open and making Steve make a disgusted face.

"Because they're his favorite. Next time we order a Hawaiian pizza you can have everyone's pineapples."

"Sweet!"

"Hawaiian pizza is gross," claims Eleven, which ends in the two of them fighting over toppings.

Joyce shakes her head, but there's a fond smile on her face while she gives Lucas her olives.

Yeah, his parents might not know him, but a long a time ago Lucas discovered that your family doesn't need to be related to you, or even look like you.

"Dustin, El is right. Hawaiian pizza is super gross."

Eleven gives him a high five while Dustin yells in indignation. This is his weird family, not a single one like the other.

And he loves them.

When Eleven comes out of Joe's, Joyce and Will are already waiting for her alongside Jonathan in his car.

"Did he say it's okay?," asks Will, fidgeting with the diary in his hands.

"Yes. What did Mr. Monroe say?"

"That my job is gonna be waiting for me when I come back, but only if I bring him a good gift."

Eleven doesn't remember the last time she saw Will this excited. He can't stop smiling and carries a map of the States with him, checking every couple minutes what places they can go and writing them down in his diary. He's also making a list of all the things they need to take with them so they can be as prepared for everything as possible.

The first thing in the list is all their Dungeons & Dragons stuff, followed by "camera" and "sunscreen??" . Eleven isn't making a list, she's just gonna copy Will's.

They reach the Lab in a few minutes. Eleven doesn't feel anxious anymore each time she comes here, but that doesn't mean she likes it either. Too many bad memories, too much pain and fear enclosed in that building. Will takes her hand and Eleven squeezes it, because she knows he doesn't like it either.

Dr. Grantt and Dr. Akerman are already waiting for them at the door, their white robes impeccable as always. They're nice people, it just happens that their predecessors were assholes who ruined Eleven's and Will's lives.

"Mrs. Byers, Jonathan, Eleven, William. Pleasure to see you as always," greets them Dr. Grantt, a soft smile in her face. She's even shorter than Will and Eleven, which says a lot.

Dr. Sybil Grantt must be a little older than Joyce. She has dark brown eyes and olive skin. Once upon a time her hair must have been a deep black, but now it's mostly white. She's their psychologist and is

always trying to make them feel comfortable, but it's hard for El and Will to fully open up to her. Will is maybe the one who trust her the most, but that's because Will is always seeing the good in people.

"Are you ready for your test? Once we're done, we can eat chocolate cake. It's the one you like, William. Sybil and I even made that lemonade Eleven likes so much," promises Dr. Akerman, winking at them.

Dr. Cecil Akerman is a tall and skinny man who always has a smile and words of support to offer. He must be in his early thirties, but he's already going bald. He has dark skin and hazel eyes and he's always using big glasses. He's the one who carries the tests that Will and Eleven must do. Although, he asks them if they're okay all the time, stops when they're not feeling well and always has some sort of treat for them after all the tests are over, it's a little hard for them to like him.

If the world was a different place, Eleven knows she would adore Dr. Grantt and Dr. Akerman, because they're two of the nicest people she has ever met. But, as things are, they're not on her list of favorite people.

"Before starting," says Joyce, putting a hand in Eleven's shoulder and the other in Mike's, "the kids wanted to ask something."

"Of course, Eleven and William know that they can say whatever they want," assures Dr. Grantt and El knows the woman is being sincere, but she just can't trust her.

This is the moment of truth. Little matters if their parents let them go or not. If the people at Hawkins National Laboratory say they can't, it's going to be really hard to make this trip. Sure, they could try to escape, but she doesn't want to know what would happen to Joyce, Hopper, Jonathan, Nancy and Steve.

Dr. Grantt and Dr. Akerman may be nicer and more human than Brenner or Wilkes, but that doesn't says a lot. Besides, they have been working with the government for long before they came here, they knew what was happening at Hawkins and they didn't do anything.

“We want to make a trip,” begins Will, but he gets interrupted by Dr. Akerman.

“Oh, that sounds fun! Where are you going?”

“San Diego. California,” answers Eleven and Dr. Akerman frowns.

“Isn’t that a little far? It’s going to be a little hard to go to California and be back in a week. You’re not going to be able to really enjoy the beach!”

They still outside the building, which makes this easier. Inside they feel small and weak, just test subjects waiting to be played with, even if that’s not the intention anymore. But outside they’re still El and Will, they have Joyce and Jonathan with them. Dustin, Lucas and Mike are waiting for them, getting their bags ready for the trip.

They can do this. Dr. Akerman and Dr. Grantt are good people, even if she doesn’t trust them. They have made clear that they want Eleven and Will to have a life as normal as possible and Will trust them.

They’re gonna make this trip. They deserve this.

“We’re not. We want to make a two month trip. For the summer vacation,” Eleven clarifies and Dr. Akerman mouth makes a perfect “o” while Dr. Grantt looks at them with big eyes.

“Oh. That’s... unexpected.”

“We would be going with Lucas, Mike and Dustin,” elaborates Will and his hand is getting sweaty, but Eleven doesn’t care.

“I see, I see,” mumbles Dr. Grantt, sharing a look with Dr. Akerman. “Can you let us have a little chat? We weren’t expecting this and... we need to see a few things. Can you wait for us here?”

They don’t even finish saying “yes” before the two doctors are back inside the building, letting them in the parking lot. Well, that could have been worse.

“That could have been worse,” says Jonathan and Eleven snorts.

"It wasn't a no, so that's good. I'm sure they're just seeing how can they manage this and then they're surely going to tell you that you can go," Joyce encourages them, smiling.

"Or they are just finding the less harsh way of telling us that we must remain in close proximity of Hawkins forever," says Eleven.

Will squeezes her hand and Joyce her shoulder. "Don't say that. Everything is going to be okay," promises Joyce, "if they say no then I start yelling at them and the three of you go and get a hold of Hopper and then he starts yelling with me. Grown ups yells are pretty effective."

Jonathan snorts and Eleven starts giggling. Will doesn't say anything and Eleven knows that while he sees good in everyone, he also doesn't believe he can have nice things anymore. Eleven squeezes his hand back and he smiles. It's small, but it's still a smile.

They wait for around half an hour. Jonathan tells them all about New York and college, how big everything is. He tells them that there's lots of people everywhere all the time and that he got homesick at times, but when that happened Nancy and Steve would drive from Boston to New York or he would take the train to Boston and things would get a little better.

Eleven hasn't thought a lot about what's she's gonna do once high school is over, mostly because she wasn't sure she was allowed to leave Hawkins for enough time to go somewhere else. But, if they tell them they can go on that trip, would that mean they can go and live somewhere else too? Sure, it's not the same thing being out for two months than the vast part of the year, but it would be a step.

None of them have talked about college, actually. Lucas has said a couple of times that he wants to be a lawyer and Mike writes scripts, but going to college isn't a conversation they ever had. Suddenly, Eleven realises that Lucas, Dustin and Mike are most likely going to college. Their parents want them to do something with their lives and Nancy is in college, so why wouldn't them, especially Mike, go to college too?

What was she expecting? For things to never change? For the five of

them to stay here and be kids forever?

What does *she* want?

She doesn't know. For years she couldn't conceive life beyond the Lab's walls. Once she was allowed to live with the Byers, she was just content to enjoy a "normal" life, she never thought of the future and just lived the present. But now she has to start thinking about the future, right? So, again, what does she want?

She wants to be with her friends. Is that too much to ask?

After almost an hour, Dr. Grantt and Dr. Akerman come back.

"Let's do something," begins Dr. Akerman, "if both of you can handle today tests without problems, then you can do this trip. But," he adds, before any of them can say anything, "if you fail, we don't want you to feel dejected. On winter break we can try again, okay?"

It's like having something at your arm's length, but not being able to reach it. Next to her, Will is rigid and Eleven is almost sure he isn't breathing.

She can handle almost every test without problems, every person present knows that. If someone today isn't going to be able to handle something, that's most likely going to be Will.

Is not fair. Why are they doing this? She almost wishes they have said no from the beginning. If Will fails he is going to feel like shit, because he's going to believe it's his fault they can't make this trip.

Why can't they have something nice for once?

She hears Will take a deep breath.

"Okay. We can do that," he affirms, his voice sharp.

When Eleven turns to Will, he's looking right past Dr. Akerman and Dr. Grantt and directly to the Lab. His jaw is clenched and he's squeezing her hand again. Joyce and Jonathan are giving him worried looks, but suddenly Eleven doesn't feel dejected anymore.

She trusts Will.

“We can,” she agrees, squeezing Will hand back.

They can have this. They trust each other. They *deserve* this.

Dr. Grantt smiles at them and once more Eleven thinks that she could like them. As things are, she is just going to have to prove them that you can't stop the Byers kids.

Dr. Grantt takes him to her office, while Dr. Akerman takes Eleven to the training area.

He thinks of Mike behind the wheel of Mrs. Maraoki truck, smiling at him. He thinks of Dustin and Lucas fighting in the backseat about time travel paradoxes. He thinks of Eleven snoring softly against the truck window, ignoring Lucas and Dustin fighting beside her.

He thinks of himself in the front passenger seat, a big map in his hands, the summer wind coming through the window.

They can have this. He can *do* this.

“How was your week, William?,” Dr. Grantt asks him, offering him a lemon candy that he takes but doesn't eat.

For a second, he considers not telling her the truth. He can lie to her and say he has been sleeping well and that he hadn't had a bad episode in the whole week.

Will hates lies. He can keep secrets, but he hates lying.

“I haven't been sleeping well. And yesterday I had an episode. That's why Mike came up with the idea of a trip,” he admits, not looking at Dr. Grantt.

“Thanks for being honest with me, William. What was this episode about?”

It's hard to open up to a person you don't completely trust.

Eleven is always telling him that Grantt and Akerman are barely better than Brenner and Wilkes. She tells him that they knew what was happening in Hawkins and didn't do anything about it, that all the good things she and Will have are not due to Grantt and Akerman, but because they earned them.

Will knows that, deep down, Eleven doesn't hate them. Not completely at least. They *are* good people, even if they work for an agency that has done terrible things. They *are* way better than Brenner and Wilkes and, while it's true that loads of what Eleven and Will now have is due to their own merit, a lot of it also has to do with what Grantt and Akerman have done for them. It was them who asked the government to give Eleven and Will an allowance in compensation for all the terrible things their agency has done to them and all the trouble that still causes them.

Lucas often tells Will he is naive for trusting people so much. Maybe he is, but he refuses to live thinking that everyone is out to harm him.

After all, it's not exactly people who have done the most terrible things to him.

So, even if he doesn't trust Dr. Grantt completely, he does open up to her. He believes her when she says she wants to help, and how can she help him if he doesn't tell her the truth?

He tells her all about the nightmares; about waking up and still feeling in the Upside Down; about *never stopping* to feel as if he is in the Upside Down. He talks and talks and he's scared and he can already see shadows through the corner of his eye again, but he can't let this win. He has to do great today, he has to do it. For his friends, for himself. He has to do it.

"So you think if you get away of Hawkins this is going to stop?," Dr. Grant asks him, writing something down.

"I... no. Not completely, at least," he admits, fidgeting with his fingers. "I know that I'm not exactly okay in the head..."

“William...”

“I know what you’re gonna say. I’m not saying I’m a nutjob, I’m just saying the truth. And those things... I know that those problems are not gonna disappear because I’m not in Hawkins, but...,” he sighs, ruffling his hair. Sometimes is hard to talk, hard to explain.

Eleven understand him, even when he isn’t being completely clear. Mike listens to what he has to say and pushes when he can and just stays with him when he can’t. Lucas doesn’t ask him to talk at all, just sits next to him and listens to music with him, not letting him drown in his own mind, but don’t forcing something either. Dustin talks so Will doesn’t need to do it, filling the silence with jokes and theories and riddles.

Even when he can’t talk to his friends, they listen. Unless he is completely gone in his misery and fears, Will doesn’t feel like an idiot for not being able to talk.

With Dr. Grantt, even when he is completely okay he feels like an idiot for not expressing himself clear as water.

“But?”

“But everytime I see my bedroom walls I remember how it was trying to hide for the monster. Everytime I... every time I go to school, to Mike’s house, to the woods... I see the Upside Down. Everything in this town is a reminder of there because every building, every street, every tree... *everything* looks like it looked there. I just... I just want to see something different. I don’t want to see the Upside Down even when I’m not seeing it.”

The room is silent for a while. He can’t even hear the sound of pencil against paper and it takes him a few seconds to realise that it’s because Dr. Grantt isn’t writing anything. She is just looking at him, her face not showing any bit of emotion. Her eyes, though... her eyes tell Mike that she is sorry for him.

He knows she is not a bad person. It’s a pity she works for an agency that has done horrifying things to people, himself included.

After almost a minute of silence, Dr. Grantt talks.

“Are you seeing the Upside Down now?”

Will can't help to give her a sad smile.

“The Lab is the Upside Down.”

When Dr. Grantt takes him to Dr. Akerman, she tells him that she is sure Will can handle being away from Hawkins for two months. Dr. Akerman looks pleasantly surprised and Will *knows* they're not bad, no matter what Eleven tells him.

“Are you ready for your tests, Will?,” Dr. Akerman asks, taking him to the White Room.

Will closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. Dustin and Lucas bickering in the backseat. Eleven sleeping peacefully. Mike smiling at him from behind the wheel. Will himself with the map in his hands.

He opens his eyes.

“I'm ready.”

They can have this.

Mike knows that Will and Eleven are not supposed to come back from the Lab at least until seven, but he's already sitting in the Byers' porch by six. He felt like going insane at his house, not even his new Stephen King book being able to distract him.

He knows they can't go on this trip if the people in the Laboratory doesn't let them, and he feels powerless not being able to do anything to help. He can get a car, help Will come back from an episode, hide his friend's powers from the world... but when Eleven and Will are in the Lab, he's useless.

Mike sighs, petting Nana's hair. The Byers' dog is old and going deaf, but Mike is fond of her. He remembers playing with her and Will

when they were still learning to read, long before their lives took an unexpected turn. He's going to be sad when she finally dies, because she's is a reminder that even though things have changed, the world is still the same.

"You know you're a great dog, right?," he asks Nana, who in turn licks his face. "Yes, you're a good and slobbery dog. Do you know how lucky you are to live with Will and El? They're amazing."

Nana barks and then licks his face again, making him laugh.

A bright light blinds him for a few seconds, the sound of Joyce's car making him get up. He looks at his watch and feels worried. It's barely half past six, they shouldn't be back for at least another half an hour.

Maybe it's something good. Maybe the Lab's people told El and Will that they can go on the trip. Maybe they nailed all their tests and are back early. Maybe nothing bad happened and, for the first time in a long time, they can have something nice.

Or maybe something terrible happened and his friends are in danger once more.

"Mike? What are you doing here?," asks Joyce, getting out of the car. She doesn't seem worried or angry or sad. That's good, right?

"I was just... Will?! What happened?!"

He rushes to Jonathan side, who is taking an unconscious Will out of the backseat and into his arms.

Mike feels his own heart in his mouth and in few seconds he's next to Will, taking him out of Jonathan arms. Terrible images flash through his head and he can't see anything but Will. There's no blood or bruises on sight, but his clothes are ruffled and he looks pale. Mike takes Will's wrist and searches for his pulse and only when he feels the calm beating of Will's heart he is able to breath again.

He doesn't realise he's shaking until Jonathan puts a hand on his shoulder.

“He’s okay, just tired,” Jonathan assures him and Mike wants to cry. God, when did he become such a crybaby? Why is his kneejerk reaction to everything crying?

“What happened?,” Mike asks, swallowing up the tears and letting Jonathan guide him inside the house.

Once inside, he puts Will on the couch and sits next to him, letting the boy’s weight rest against him. Then he notices Eleven, who comes yawning and rubbing her eyes to sit next to him.

“We’re both tired,” confesses El, her voice slurring while she slumps her body’s weight against Mike’s too.

He’s in a Byers sandwich and even though he’s still worried, he can’t help blushing.

Joyce smiles at him. “I’m going to make hot cocoa while Eleven tells you everything, ok? Jonathan, come help me.”

“What happened?,” he repeats once they’re alone, trying to make his voice sound steady.

“We told Dr. Grantt and Dr. Akerman about the trip. They told us that we could go if we passed without problems today’s tests, and that we could check with them along the journey. They even have a “friend” around Las Vegas, I think she’s called Sally Carson? They say we could stay with her to make sure we were still alright. Of course, first we had to pass the tests,” explains Eleven, stopping in the middle to yawn. “There were *lots* of tests today.”

There’s a moment of silence where the only thing that Mike can listen to is the sound of Will’s soft breathing. He finally asks, a little reluctant, “And how’d it go?”

Eleven looks at him, grinning, but it’s Will who answers him, his voice a little groggy, “We nailed them.” Will sits up, stretching his neck and then looking at Mike with a wide smile. “We can go on the trip, Mike.”

The three of them end up laughing like maniacs on the couch, hugging each other and forming a weird human pile. Joyce and

Jonathan come back little after, mugs of hot cocoa in tow and smiles on their faces. Joyce lets them call Lucas and Dustin and they almost go deaf with the howl of happiness that Dustin makes.

They have lots of things to do and just two days to do them. Provisions to buy, bags to prepare, fuel tanks to fill. It's the first time they're going to be that far away from Hawkins, the first time they're going to be away from home for that long, the first trip they'll make without their parents.

It's new and it's exciting and it's summer and they're young and they're friends. They went through hell and they came back and Mike knows that in the future bad things are going to happen again. But this summer? This summer is theirs and theirs alone.

And they're going to make the best out of it.

Notes for the Chapter:

Come and scream about Stranger Things and Yuri on Ice with me in my [my tumblr](#) :)

3. Chapter 2: Farewell

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks to everyone who leave comments on the last chapter! It really means a lot to me :3 Also, feedback is welcomed! Please tell me if there's any mistake so I can fix it :)

Dustin has a checklist. He is extremely proud of his checklist. You see, this checklist is like his child. He gave *birth* to this checklist.

“Oh my *God*. It’s just a stupid list!,” Lucas groans, making Eleven laugh.

They’re at Hopper’s, waiting for him and Steve to finish the barbecue. Nancy, Jonathan and Joyce are making the salads, probably talking about college and stuff. Dustin, from his spot on the couch between Eleven and Mike, throws a gummy bear at Lucas in front him, outraged.

“How *dare* you?! Checklists are what separate ourselves from animals and this checklist in particular is going to save our lives when we’re out on the road.”

Mike winks at Will, who giggles, and they might think that nobody is watching them, but Dustin is great at watching people. “And how is this checklist exactly going to save our lives?,” inquires Mike, making Will giggle again.

If Dustin wasn’t a diplomat at heart, he would bump their heads. Hard. Maybe that way they would stop being so dumb, right?

“Why, Michael, if you must know, this checklist is going to help us get everything we need for the trip. What if Eleven’s period comes early? Not a problem! The checklist says we need to pack pads before we go. And they needs to be pads, because Eleven doesn’t like tampons.”

“That’s right,” affirms Eleven, smirking.

Will is laughing so hard he is bent in half, almost slipping away to the floor. Next to him Lucas, horrified, looks at Dustin, who just smiles. He's so proud of himself.

"Why do you know that?!", Lucas screeches.

"Why don't *you* know that? How is it that you don't know our best friend preferences? Shame on you, sir. Shame on you."

At this point Will is already on the floor and at Dustin sides Eleven and Mike shake with laughter. Lucas doesn't look any less horrified.

"I knew that," pants Will, breathless after laughing so hard.

"You live with her!"

"I also knew that," seconds Mike, smirking.

"You used to date her!"

"Just admit you don't know me one inch, Lucas. I'm so sad, I thought we were best friends..." laments Eleven, wiping away a fake tear.

"I hate all of you!," shouts Lucas, crossing his arms and digging himself into the couch.

His friends laugh and Dustin chooses that moment to continue, talking as casually as possible. "Everything is on the checklist: at least four changes of underwear, shampoo, Dungeons & Dragons, condoms..."

Will chokes on his laughter and starts coughing, while Mike blushes, Eleven looks at him with big eyes and Lucas just looks ready to murder him.

"Why would we need condoms?!"

"Do you want me to explain to you what condoms are for?," Dustin questions him, a serious expression on his face. It's hard not to laugh at Lucas face right now.

"Dustin! We won't use condoms on the trip!," hisses Mike,

scandalized, stealing nervous looks at the kitchen where his sister is.

“Shame on you, Mike. Safe sex is happy sex. Don’t have sex without a condom. I mean, unless you’re trying to have kids, but we’re too young for that, so don’t have sex without a condom yet.”

“What Mike and Lucas are trying to say,” begins Eleven, her face flushed but trying to look mature, “it’s that we won’t be *having* sex on this trip. I mean, we’re not having sex here, why will we be having sex while on vacation?”

Will just nods repeatedly, his eyes big and his face as flushed as Eleven’s. It’s really, *really* hard not to laugh. But Dustin is a professional and he needs to look after his friends, so he somehow manages to keep a straight face.

“You never know. And it’s already on the checklist and, as we all know, checklist equals civilization, so we’re gonna bring condoms. Don’t worry, they won’t bite you.”

“Sometimes I don’t know why we’re friends,” laments Lucas, burying his face in his hands.

Dustin grins widely.

“Because I’m a sweetheart and the voice of reason. And I always intermediate when there’s a conflict. *And* I’m just plain awesome,” he enlists. Then he adds, “besides, you all love me to the bone.”

Lucas shakes his head, but he’s smiling. Eleven punches him in the arm, without force thanks God, and then takes his arm, resting her head on Dustin’s shoulder.

“We’re going on an adventure. An adventure that *we* chosed.”

Will sighs happily. “Isn’t that great?”

Yes, it is.

“Kids! Food is almost done!,” shouts Hopper from the backyard. “Is the table already set up?!”

“Almost!” lies Eleven, while they get up and hurry up to the dining room.

As Dustin watches his friends run ahead of him, he wishes with all his heart that this summer won’t be just a sidequest in their lives. He wishes this is just the beginning of their real adventure, the adventure in which they became the heroes they want for their own stories.

Dustin’s Amazing Checklist - Paladin Edition

- °At least four changes of underwear
- °Shampoo
- °Conditioner (we know you use it, don’t play dumb)
- °At least three t-shirts (and NONE of them can be that ugly yellow one)
- °Sleeping bag
- °Ibuprofen
- °Gun (don’t forget to have it loaded, dumbass)
- °Bullets
- °Sunscreen (we don’t want your delicate skin to have a sunburn)
- °At least two shorts
- °A formal shirt (just in case we have the opportunity to have dinner at a fancy restaurant)
- °A formal suit (see above)
- °Formal shoes (see above)
- °Parrying dagger
- °At least one cap
- °Sunglasses
- °Swimsuit
- °Pijama
- °At least two pair of pants
- °Rainboots
- °Sneakers
- °Two books that you have not read yet (that you have NOT read, okay? That means that *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The*

Adventures of Tom Sawyer don't count)

°Three cassettes with whatever music you want

°Snacks

°A water bottle

°The Dungeons & Dragons set

°Your Dungeons & Dragons costume

°A belt

The list continues on the other side, but Mike has already checked it twice and he's sure he isn't forgetting anything. How did he manage to shove all the things on that list into his suitcase is beyond him. Well, that's not actually true. Nancy helped him pack and then he made Holly sit on the suitcase so he could close it. Siblings power.

"Can I go with you?," Holly asks him, batting her eyelashes at him. If he were Will that maneuver might have worked, but Mike is already immune to this wicked tactic. "Pleeease."

"Sorry, Holly. Maybe in a couple of years," he says. When his sister pouts at him, he adds, "besides, are you going to leave Nancy alone? You know there always needs to be at least two of us to protect the house from the forces of evil."

Holly gasps, horrified. "You're right. I forgot. I have to stay and protect our home," she says, solemnly.

Mike smiles, then ruffles her hair. At his bedroom door, Nancy rolls her eyes, but smiles nevertheless.

"You're going to bring me a gift, though, right?"

"Of course," assures Mike, "What do you want?"

"A ring. For my wedding with Will."

Nancy starts laughing and Mike jeers.

"I already told you that you can't marry Will."

"Why not? I love him and he loves me," states Holly, which makes

Nancy laugh more.

“He loves you *as a little sister*. And he has almost ten years more than you. And I say you can’t,” he scoffs, taking Holly down from his suitcase.

Holly squints at him, which he can’t help to find cute even though he is a little annoyed with her. After all, when a little girl in a purple leotard and a baby blue tutu, who is barely 3’ 10”, looks at you suspiciously, you can’t help but to find it adorable. Even if that girl is your annoying baby sister. Who wants to marry your best friend.

“It’s not fair,” affirms Holly, crossing her arms, “you want Will all for yourself. You are greedy, Mike.”

“Oh my God,” says Nancy, gasping for air after laughing so much.

Not for the first time, Mike wishes he were an only child.

“Mike, Mrs. Maraoki is already here,” says his mother, entering his room. On second thought, he doesn’t actually want to be an only child. “Girls, can you let me alone with your brother for a second? Tell Mrs. Maraoki that we will be there in a minute.”

Nancy takes his suitcase and Holly grabs his backpack and the two of them go down, not before giving him sympathetic looks. His mother sits on his bed and pats the space next to her, signaling him to sit beside her. Mike sighs and follows suit, preparing himself for whatever it’s coming.

“Michael, I want you to promise me that you’re going to behave, okay?,” she asks him and Mike is making a big effort not to roll his eyes. She is just trying to be a good mother, he reminds himself.

“Yes, mum.”

“I still think you’re a little young to make this trip without parental supervision, but I trust you to make wise decisions.”

She’s just trying to be a good parent, even if sometimes it looks like she randomly chooses when to try and when to not even look like she’s trying.

“Yes, mum. Listen, I gotta go,” he tells her, before she can say anything else. “I promised Will I would be by his house before midday and I don’t want to make him wait.”

“I... yes, of course. It’s just...” she says. She chews her lip a little before continuing, “Are you...? Mike, are you...?”

He looks at her expectantly. Everytime Will comes up in a conversation, she does this. She hasn’t finished asking yet, though. A morbid part of himself wants to watch her finally asking it, wants to watch her face as he answers her. Then again, of course, he isn’t exactly sure of the answer.

“Am I what, mom?”

He looks at her in the eyes and her mouth quivers, not even a single sound coming out.

“Are you... nevermind. It wasn’t important. Have fun.”

They look at each other awkwardly for a second, before his mom gives him a quick hug.

“Are you okay, kiddo?,” Mrs. Maraoki asks him when he gets out of the house and greets her at the truck’s door.

“Sure. I just want to go already.”

Mrs. Maraoki doesn’t seem to believe him, but thankfully doesn’t say anything else. Nancy and Holly are already in the backseat and he is a little surprised when Mrs. Maraoki handles him the keys.

“You’re going to be driving it from today until the end of August. Better get used to it, right?,” she says, winking at him.

Mike smiles and hugs her. It’s so different from his mother’s touch and a couple of years ago he would have been devastated about it, but now it’s just an old scar.

“Thanks for everything, Tilda.”

“Always, kiddo.”

“Are you really sure you’re okay with this?,” Hopper whispers to her, trying not to be heard by the kids in the next room.

“I already told you that I am perfectly fine,” she assures him, scrubbing the frying pan in her hands as hard as she can. God, why can’t that damn thing get cleaned already?

They’re gathered together to get lunch before the kids started their trip. It was Nancy’s idea. She said that, even though they had dinner together on Friday night and lunch yesterday, it was a good farewell. Besides, they’re not going to be together for two months, they should be together as much as they can for the time they have left. Nancy is a smart and sensible girl, if Jonathan and Steve listened to her more, they wouldn’t end in so many troubles.

... then again, Joyce thinks while applying more soap to the frying pan, half of the problems the three of them end up in are actually Nancy’s ideas, so maybe she is selectively sensible.

They packed the truck with the kid’s luggage before having lunch and now they’re just waiting for Joyce to end cleaning the dishes so they can say goodbye and leave. For some goddamn reason, though, the frying pan’s grease doesn’t wash away.

“Jesus, Joyce, you’re gonna hurt your hand like that,” says Hopper, trying to take the frying pan away from her.

“Get away, I’m trying to clean!”

“You’re digging a hole in it, that’s what you’re doing!”

They glare at each other for a few seconds, until Hopper finally sighs and lets go of the pan.

“If you’re worried about this trip...,” he starts, but Joyce stops him with a scoff.

“Of course I’m worried about this trip!,” she hisses. She’s clenching her hand around the frying pan, her voice shaking. “If you haven’t

noticed, Jim, I worry about a lot of things. I worry about Jonathan losing his scholarship; I worry about Will's panic attacks, I worry about Eleven being taken away from me; I worry about my kids being kidnaped again. I worry a lot, Jim, I worry until getting sick," she has to stop for a second because she's going to end up crying out of anger. She takes a deep breath, trying to calm herself down. Hopper doesn't say anything, just puts a hand on her shoulder until she can continue, "I worry a lot, Jim, but I'm not going to stop them from living their life. I'm not going to lock them down in this house so I can be sure they're safe. If they want to travel the country... damn, if they want to travel the *whole world* I will just wish them well and swallow up my fears, because they deserve better than that."

They stay like that for a moment: Joyce flustered, Hopper silent. Finally, he sighs, giving her a hug that Joyce, for once, doesn't refuse. She sniffles, but doesn't cry. She's not going to cry when nothing bad had actually happened.

"You're right. See, that's why we're the grown up division in this weird ass team. You're stronger and more mature than I, while I punch things harder."

Joyce laughs, hugging Hopper back. God, is so nice to have a friend who doesn't think you're fucking nuts.

After a couple of minutes they hear a cough. When they turn, Eleven is looking at them and trying to hide a smirk.

"Am I interrupting something?"

Hopper roll his eyes and Joyce laughs again.

"It's not gonna happen, kiddo, stop trying," says Hopper.

"So you say. But, you know, Will and I are going to be away for the summer and Jonathan is for sure going to spend most of his time with Steve and Nancy. You two could have fun and do more *grown up* stuff..." she suggests, wiggling her eyebrows and Joyce's belly hurts of laughing so hard.

"Jesus Christ. What's with kids this days?," swears Hopper, rubbing

his temples. "I swear to God, every time I hear this girl say more than two words in a row it's to bother me."

Joyce pats him in the arm in sympathy, but doesn't stop smiling. Yes, she worries a lot, but life has been actually bearable lately.

She knows Will and Eleven are not completely at peace, she knows that there are things they don't tell her. It's not because they don't trust her, but because they need their own space and to grow into their own people. That's part of why she does want them to go on this trip: is an opportunity to grow. Besides, when they're with their friends they open up more and that's what they need: people in which they can confide.

They go outside, where Mike is already hugging his sisters and Steve is explaining to Lucas and Dustin how to change a tire in less than three minutes. Jonathan and Will are on the truck, packing a couple of lunchboxes in for the day.

One by one, she hugs all the kids. She knows that she has become a sort of second mom to all of them and, being honest, she also feels as if they were her own.

"Be good and don't get too lost," she tells them, trying to keep her voice steady. "And call every time you can. I love you. All of you, you know that, right?"

"We love you too, Mrs. Byers," affirms Dustin, blushing.

"Take photos," says Jonathan.

"Go to local fairs," says Steve.

"Watch a sunrise," says Nancy.

"Eat as much greasy food as you can," says Hopper.

"Bring me a gift," says Holly.

"Have fun," says Joyce.

With a last goodbye, Mike starts the truck and then they're gone.

She's gonna miss them, but she can live with that. They're coming back to her. They're her kids, and nothing can really keep them apart.

4. Chapter 3: Out in the road

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks to everyone that is reading tis fic! Kudos are welcome and comments are encouraged. If you have any feedback is more than welcome because it helps me improve.

Dustin's Amazing Checklist - Wizard Edition

- °Two hoodies (I know it's summer, but you are cold all the time, so do it)
- °At least four changes of underwear
- °Shampoo
- °At least three t-shirts
- °Sleeping bag (please, don't forget to wash it. Last slumber party it reeked)
- °Sketchbook
- °Pencils
- °Watercolors
- °Brushes
- °Silver knife
- °Sunscrean
- °At least two shorts
- °A formal shirt (just in case we have the opportunity to have dinner at a fancy restaurant)
- °A formal suit (see above)
- °Formal shoes (see above)
- °At least one cap
- °Sunglasses
- °Swimsuit
- °Pijama
- °At least two pair of pants
- °Camera
- °Sneakers
- °Two books that you have not read yet
- °Three cassettes with whatever music you want (but try to bring something listenable, not just your weird indie music)

°Snacks

°A water bottle

°Your Dungeons & Dragons costume

°Dices

“What are you doing?,” Mike asks him half an hour into their trip. He has sunglasses on and a Mets cap. He looks handsome like that, with his hands on the wheel and a smile in his face, the road reflecting on his sunglasses...

Then again, Will might be a little biased.

“Just verifying my checklist,” Will answers, and immediately he wishes he had stayed silent.

“What?! You had to check it *before* leaving! What if you forgot something?!,” yells Dustin, accidentally throwing the granola bar he was about eat at Eleven.

“This is mine now,” proclaims Eleven, biting the granola bar.

Dustin groans, “See what happens when you don’t check your list? I lose my food.”

Lucas sympathetically pats Dustin’s back and Mike and Will laugh, while Eleven keeps eating. Will feels charged with happiness and adrenaline and can’t stop fidgeting in his seat.

He couldn’t sleep last night. But, for the first time in *years* it wasn’t due to nightmares and fears. It was for excitement. All he could think about was the things they are going to do, the places they’re going to see, all the time they’re going to be spending together just being teenagers and friends and just being themselves.

Sure, they’re prepared in case something bad happens. As they have known for a couple of years, Hawkins Laboratory isn’t just an isolated case and there’s dark things hiding everywhere but...

“Look, a sheep!,” gasps Eleven, watching out of the window with big eyes.

“Are you seriously getting surprised by a sheep?,” snickers Lucas.

"I haven't seen a sheep before," alleges Eleven, pouting. Will can't help giggling, earning himself a flicker in his ear courtesy of his sister. "You're supposed to be on my side."

"I am, I am!," he swears, still giggling.

"Mouthbreathers, all of you," accuses Eleven, crossing her arms.

"Let's do this," starts Dustin, always the peacekeeper, "if we see a petting zoo or a farm with guided tours, we go there and you pet some sheeps."

Will could swear that there's sparkles in El's eyes. Which, considering their lives, maybe she *actually* has sparkles in her eyes.

"Really?"

"Really."

"Pinky promise?"

Dustin grins at her and hooks his pinky with hers. "Pinky promise."

"You know? I think there's an amusement park in Chicago that has a petting zoo. We can go there," suggests Lucas.

"Yes!," shouts Eleven, throwing herself across Dustin's lap to hug Lucas.

Dustin yelps and Lucas laughs, hugging Eleven back. The three of them look joyful and lively, so young and alive that Will is taking the camera out of his bag before realising it, snapping a picture of this moment. A moment when they're all young and together.

"Did you just take a picture of us?," ask Dustin, raising an eyebrow.

"Yep," he answers, making a popping sound with the "p" that makes Mike giggle. "It's officially the first picture of this trip."

"Nice," says Eleven, going back to her seat.

"Aw, yes! This trip is already on!," shouts Dustin, punching the air.

Behind the wheel, Mike laughs and Will feels his own heart ache but it doesn't feel bad. Mike looks at him for a second and Will takes his chance and snaps a picture of him too. His friend shakes his head, but doesn't stop smiling.

"When we get out of the car I'm taking a picture of you," warns Mike and Will grins.

"My camera, with my rules."

"It's actually your brother's camera."

"Maybe, but during this trip, it's mine."

"Well, then I guess I will have to use the camera that I borrowed from Mrs. Maraoki..." says Mike, winking at Will who is sure his heart just skipped a beat.

"Dude, is Mrs. Maraoki your long lost grandmother?," asks Lucas. "Because she's totally spoiling you."

"What can I say? I'm just a great employee," brags Mike, making all his friends roll his eyes.

"So you say..."

Lucas and Mike continue bickering while Dustin and Eleven start a game of I spy. Will just looks at them for a bit, his heart too big for all the love he is feeling towards his friends. It doesn't matter what's going to happen to them a year from now. Ten years. Twenty years. This is theirs and, even if some things change, they're always going to have each other's back.

They're more than friends. They're family.

"We're here," Mike informs her after almost two hours of driving.

"Thanks. Wait for me in the truck, I'll be back in a couple of minutes," she tells them, which is received with concerned looks.

"You're sure you don't want one of us to go with you?," Lucas asks her.

"Yes, I'm sure. I'm going to be okay, don't worry."

"Okay, we'll wait here," concedes Dustin, "you take your time."

"Will do."

She gets out of the truck and walks to the house. It's not the first time she's here, not at all. She has been coming here almost every month for the last four years. And yet, she still doesn't know how to feel when she knocks and Becky opens the door, a smile in her lips.

"Jane! You came earlier than I thought!," says her aunt, giving her a tight hug that Eleven reciprocates as she can. "God, you are getting so big. Aren't your friends coming?," Becky asks, waving at the guys.

Eleven looks at them a second, and then her attention is back on Becky.

"I prefer to be alone, if it's not a problem."

"Oh. Of course, whatever makes you feel more comfortable," Becky says, her smile fading a little. "Come on in, your mom is waiting for you."

The Ives house is almost exactly the same as it was the first time Eleven stepped inside of it, but less messy. Half of Eleven's allowance goes to her mother and her aunt, to help them pay the bills and nurse for Terry. Maybe the biggest change in the house is the pink room in the second floor, which used to have an unused crib and now has an unused bed. Eleven has been in that room twice, but never was able to actually stay the night in it.

When she enters the living room, her mother is watching the tv, as always. There's a movie on this time, but Eleven doesn't recognize it. She steps closer to Terry, who lays her eyes on Eleven. There's a small smile in her face.

Or maybe Eleven is just being delusional.

“Look, Terry. It’s Jane, she came to see you.”

“Hi, mom.”

Terry doesn’t answer, of course, but her eyes don’t leave Eleven.

“I’m gonna leave you two alone, okay? Call me if you need anything. I’m gonna be in the kitchen.”

When Becky leaves the room, Eleven sits next to Terry, who follows her with her eyes. They stay quiet for a while: Eleven by choice, Terry because she can’t talk anymore. The low sound of the tv lulls her into her own mind, something that can be equal parts comforting and distressing.

It’s hard for Eleven to explain how she feels about her mother. Too many different feelings converge at once and she feels sad, angry, happy, guilty, exhausted. Looking at her is like looking at a mirror in a fun house: a distorted picture that looks like reality, but is not.

It’s not unusual for Eleven to imagine what kind of mother Terry would have been if they had the chance.

Would she have been the worrying type? Maybe she would have wanted to know where Eleven... where *Jane* was all the time. She wouldn’t have wanted Jane to do soccer because it was dangerous and would have encouraged her to do art, something that wouldn’t hurt her at all.

Or maybe she would have been the over encouraging type, always pushing Jane to do new things and be the very best at everything she tried. Terry would have gone to every soccer match, to every school play, to every science fair. She would have been her number one cheerleader and maybe it would have been embarrassing but Jane would have been used to it.

Maybe Terry would have been the strict type. It wouldn’t matter what Jane did, Terry would have wanted her to do better. An A in her tests? Why couldn’t have been an A+? Waking up early in the mornings? Well, she could have woken up a little earlier and make breakfast.

Perhaps she would have been the overly pleasing mother, always trying Jane to be happy and have an easy life. Terry wouldn't just helped Jane with her homework, she would have done it. She would have tried to be her best friend, more occupied in that than in actually raising her.

Or, maybe, Terry would have been too drugged up to realize she had a daughter...

No, that's unfair. Lately, Eleven thinks lots of unfair things.

Terry looked for her until her mind and body couldn't keep going anymore. She knew her daughter was captive and fought to bring her back. Eleven might not know for sure what kind of mother Terry would have been, but what she can be sure is that the woman would have tried her best.

"Hi, mom," she says once more, after almost ten minutes of silence. "I already ended school. Guess what? I'm going on a trip to California with my friends. Remember my friends? I told you about them."

Terry looks at her, but if she understands what Eleven is saying, she doesn't show it. For Eleven, who doesn't speak much, talking with her mother is difficult. Frustrating, even.

"There's Will, Joyce's son. Do you remember Joyce? She's the one who always gives me a ride here. I'm living with her and Will, remember?," silence meets her once more, but Eleven keeps talking. "Then there's Mike. He and me used to date, but now we're just friends. And there's Dustin, he's really sweet. He's a great listener and amazing at jokes, he always brightens my days when I'm sad."

Eleven gets up, walking to the window. She slides the curtain open, looking at the street where the truck is parked. Will and Mike are talking, Mike laughing at something Will said. In the backseat, Dustin is peeking at Eleven's bag. Next to him, Lucas yawns at looks out the window, meeting her eyes. He looks surprised for a second, but then he smiles, waving. Eleven smiles and waves back.

She goes back to her seat, still smiling.

"Then there's Lucas, of course. We had a rough start. He didn't like me much in the beginning, but it was a hard time for him, so I don't hold it on him. He's really smart and funny. He's the "strong guy" on our team," Eleven chuckles, joking. "It's kind of a joke, because we're more on the nerd side, so he being the strong one doesn't say much. But he is. Strong, I mean. You would like him. I hope you would, at least."

Eleven stays silent again for a while, before sighing and standing up once more.

"I promise I going to introduce you to them one day. I will, it's just... It's hard for me, you know?"

Terry doesn't answer.

"I'm gonna go now. I won't be back for two months, but I'm coming again. I promise."

She gives Terry a kiss on the cheek, before going to find Becky in the kitchen. They chat a little, Eleven telling her aunt about her scores in the school test and the plans for the trip. Becky offers to give her pocket money, but Eleven refuses. The whole point of giving part of her allowance to her mother and aunt is for them to have an easier life, she doesn't want to take a single penny out of them.

Becky walks her to the door and gives her one last hug, wishing her luck and waving at the guys from the door.

"How was it?," asks her Mike, trying to sound nonchalant and epically failing.

"It was okay. Now let's go."

None of them say anything, but Dustin squeezes her hand and gives her a tiny smile.

It's hard for Eleven to go to Jane's house. To see the mother she could have had, the house in where she could have lived, the life she could have lived. It's hard, but lifes goes on and she's gonna make of it the most she can.

“Next stop: Chicago!,” announce Mike, honking the truck’s horn.

They cheer, and Eleven is at peace again.

They reach Chicago at quarter to seven and they’re all starving. They book into a cheap hotel in the downtown where Will and Elven share a room and Dustin, Lucas and Mike another. Maybe it’s not the nicer hotel in the city, but to them is wonderful.

“Look, guys! They have tiny soaps!,” marvels Dustin from the bathroom.

“And there’s mints under the pillows,” mentions Mike, bouncing in his bed like a five year old.

Sometimes Lucas is sure he’s the more mature of them all. It’s kind of a terrifying thought. Mostly because he still sleeps in his Winnie the Pooh pajamas, so he doesn't feel too mature.

“Guys, I'm starving, can we go now? Please?”

“Fine, but I choose where we eat,” declares Dustin, coming out of the bathroom with a towel in his hair.

They end up eating smoked salmon near the Lake Michigan, the five of them drinking soda and trying to be sophisticated. They fail, of course, but the intention is what matters.

“I’ve never eaten salmon before,” comments Will, who seems to be really enjoying it. Which is not the case with Eleven, who eats every bit with a scrunched nose.

“I’ve never eaten smoked food before. I’m not sure I like it,” confesses Lucas. “It’s not horrible, but I would prefer a hamburger.”

“Oh, yes,” agrees Eleven, nodding enthusiastically. “With bacon and french fries.”

“And fried eggs and cheddar.”

Mike chuckles and Dustin shakes his head, disapproving. Will ignores what they're saying, stealing salmon from Mike's plate.

"This is why we can't have nice things. Your taste buds are commoners."

Will snorts and soda comes out of his nose and this time Mike is laughing hard, his whole body shaking. Eleven looks disgusted at Will and Lucas starts laughing too, tears menacing to come out of his eyes. Dustin shakes his head again, looking defeated.

"See? You're all a disgrace. I still love you, so don't mind. You might be barbarians, but I'm fond of you."

"Oh my God, shut up!," begs Will, laughing and throwing a napkin at Dustin, who catches it and cleans his mouth.

After dinner they go to buy ice cream cones, the summer heat catching up to them. There's still daylight, so they take the chance and go to take walk by the shore.

"Wow. There's so much water," says Dustin. "Can we swim in it?"

"We can," assures him Will, looking at a pamphlet they got from the tourism office, "but not here. There's designated beaches. Maybe tomorrow we can go?"

"Sounds good," agrees Mike, making Dustin cheer. Then a slightly chilly breeze blows and Will noticeably shudders, always so sensitive to the cold. "Oh, you're chilly? Here, take my jacket. I wasn't using it anyways."

"Thanks, Mike."

Will takes the jacket, smiling shyly at Mike, who smiles back. Lucas shares a look with Eleven, who rolls her eyes and then he has to close his mouth in a tight line not to laugh.

"Five bucks say the only reason he brought the jacket is to give it to Will," El whispers to him, walking really closely.

Lucas snorts. "Please, I know that's 100% true, so I'm not betting

against you on that.”

“What are you talking about?” asks Dustin, a couple of steps ahead of them.

“Nothing,” they both chant, trying to look as innocent as possible.

“You still cold?” they hear Mike ask. “Come here, maybe this is better.”

When Lucas looks at them, Mike has an arm around Will shoulders, who’s smiling at him again. This time is Lucas’ turn to roll his eyes, trying hard not to groan.

There’s high chances he might not survive this trip.

“Thanks, Mike. You’re a really great friend.”

Eleven rolls his eyes again and this time Lucas does laugh. Well, he can imagine way worse ways to die.

They stay in Chicago three days. One of them they go to swim in the lake, but there’s too many people in there, so they go back to the hotel room early.

The next day they go to the Field Museum in the morning and to the Shedd Aquarium in the afternoon. That night they go to eat hot dogs to a place where you can put all kinds of weird toppings on them. Mike puts caramelized onions, sweet mustard and fried turnips in his and it’s *delicious*.

In their third and last day, they try going to the petting zoo, but it’s closed due to renovations. Eleven looks sad and Lucas guilty for letting her hopes up, but thankfully Dustin intervenes and reminds them that they still have half a country to travel and there’s for sure going to be lots of petting zoos from Chicago to San Diego.

They end up doing sightseeings, taking photos of the city with Will and Mike’s cameras. At some point they even get another fellow tourist to take a photo of them all in front of the Buckingham

Fountain. That's their first photo together in the trip and for some reason Mike is a little excited by that.

They walk a lot that day, from the early hours in the morning until their feet can't walk one more step. They order service room in Lucas, Mike and Dustin's room and stay up until ungodly hours in the morning.

Mike wakes up to Dustin snorings and feels disoriented. His pillow feels weird and when he looks at it he realize that's not actually his pillow, but El's leg. He groans, realizing they slept in the floor and his back hurts like crazy now.

"Shh, 'm trying to sleep," mumbles Lucas somewhere to Mike's right.

Mike tries to look at him but he can't because, as he now notices, Will is cuddling him like an octopus and doesn't let him move. He blushes, but thankfully everybody is asleep and no one notices. He sighs and considers going back to sleep, but for some reason he decides to check what hour it is in his watch.

They're fucked.

"Get up! Get up! Get up!," he starts yelling, making Will wake up with a yelp.

"What the fuck, man," grumbles Dustin from across the room, rubbing his eyes. Mike throws a pillow at him, "Dude!"

"It's quarter to ten! We're supposed to leave our rooms in fifteen minutes!," he shouts, and Eleven suddenly stands up, kicking him in doing so.

The next fifteen minutes are a complete chaos. Will and Eleven almost fly to their room, while Lucas, Dustin and Mike start packing as fast as they can. Mike can't find one of his socks and, when he finally finds it, he realizes he can't close his suitcase anymore. He ends on top of the damn suitcase, pushing down and trying to close it, barely succeeding.

Lucas brushes his teeth and thrusts all his clothes in his suitcase. He is hardly awake and he ends putting his toothbrush into the suitcase

without washing it and spitting in a glass next to his bed.

“Look at your checklists to make sure you don’t forget anything!,” shouts Dustin, while frantically throwing everything on his bed into his suitcase. He goes to the bathroom to grab his shampoo and ends banging his foot against the door’s threshold.

He didn’t know Dustin knew so many profanities, but you never stop getting to know someone.

They reach the reception with less than a minute left, the five of them panting and sweating. Eleven has mismatched sneakers on and Mike is pretty sure Will’s shirt is actually one of Eleven’s, but they check out on time so he doesn’t really care.

By the time they get to the truck, they realize they haven’t had breakfast and that they’re actually pretty hungry.

“I’m gonna die of malnutrition,” whines Dustin.

“No, you won’t,” chides Lucas. Then, as an afterthought, he adds, “but I’m kinda hungry too.”

As if on cue, Will stomach growls and the boy looks deeply embarrassed. Mike sighs, but he’s actually smiling.

“Okay, let’s do this: we go to the drive-thru McDonald’s that we passed yesterday, we buy an early lunch and we drive non-stop to St. Louis, sounds right?”

“Aye, aye, captain!” chant his friends and Mike can’t help laughing.

Well, they’re off to a good start.

They’re singing *Never Gonna Give You Up* out loud in the middle of nowhere when the car starts to cough and buck. They shut up, watching how they start to go slower by the second and, finally, how the car stops. They stay silent for a couple of seconds, everybody looking at the car hood as if the answer to the universe mysteries where there.

Finally, Will speaks, reluctant.

“Guys... did somebody remember to fill the fuel tank?”

They stay silent for a couple of seconds more before they all start groaning.

“We’re idiots.”

They passed a gas station something like 6 miles ago, so Dustin and Mike offer themselves to go there and buy fuel while Lucas, Will and Eleven stay in the truck.

“I can’t believe we forgot to fill the fuel tank,” Mike mumbles to himself, putting a lot of sunscreen on so he doesn’t end up red like a lobster.

See? That’s why Dustin’s checklists are awesome. Would Mike have remembered to bring sunscreen? Dustin doesn’t think so.

“At least we didn’t forgot anything at the hotel. I’m gonna do a checklist for when we leave a town. Fill the fuel tank is going to be the step number one.”

Mike rolls his eyes, but doesn’t tell him anything.

They have around an hour and a half until they reach the gas station. Dustin steals a glance at Mike, who looks grumpy for how forgetful they were. He doesn’t look really angry, so Dustin takes this chance to talk to him.

He clears his throat, earning Mike’s attention.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Dustin says. They barely take four steps before he continues, “I was, you know, just wondering. In your opinion, how is the trip going?”

Mike blinks at him, surprised, and then smiles.

“Minus forgetting to fill the fuel tank? Pretty awesome. I think Will is having the time of his life. I’m can’t be sure, but it seems as if he hasn’t had a nightmare since we left Hawkins. That’s amazing. And did you see his face when we saw all those dolphins at Shedd Aquarium? He was *ecstatic*,” Mike talks and talks about what a great time Will is having. He looks happier by the word, a big grin in his face and a slight blush on his cheeks.

Dustin smiles, too, but more in the amused side.

They haven’t talked about this, but he is pretty sure everybody on their group is aware of Mike’s not so platonic feelings towards Will. Dustin think it’s cute. Yes, there’s a lot of things in the news about gay people and his own grandmother talks about the immorality of homosexuality and how Dustin should think differently of them, but frankly people are stupid. He never thought that boys liking boys or girls liking girls was something bad, but now seeing Mike’s eyes shine while he talks about Will, Dustin is sure that something so pure can’t be wrong.

Yes, he’s a romantic, sue him.

As for Will... well, Dustin is at least 77% sure Will likes Mike back. Since he came back from the Upside Down Will has been more reserved, but after all the shit that went down with Wilkes he has been hiding how he feels a lot. So, even though it was always kind of acknowledged in their group that Will likes boys, he never said it out loud. Is just another of the thousands things they don’t talk about.

Dustin hadn’t told anyone, but one of his personal plans for this trip is to get *everyone* to stop lying and hiding things. They’re best friends, they’re *family*. They can’t keep keeping secrets for one another, at least not the important things.

He lets Mike talk a little bit longer, enjoying seeing him so happy. Finally, when his friends stop for a second to breath, he talks.

“It’s really cool everything you do for Will,” he begins, trying to sound nonchalant.

Mike looks at him, a little weirded out. “Um, thanks? I mean, I would

do the same for you guys. We're friends."

"Yeah, sure. But, you know. You always go the extra mile for Will."

"Didn't we have this conversation already? I told you, Dustin, you're all my best friends."

Dustin rolls his eyes. "Really sweet, but not what I'm talking about. And no, that conversation was different. We were talking about Lucas."

"How was it different?"

Dustin groans. "Sometimes I don't know if you're really this oblivious or if you just play dumb half the time."

"What?"

Mike looks at him and he really does look as if he doesn't have a damn clue about what is Dustin talking about. He sighs. His life is so hard.

"Ok, I'm going to say this and if you don't want to talk about it or if I'm wrong you can tell me to stop and we'll never talk about it again, okay? Or at least not until you *want* to talk about it."

"What the heck are you talking about?"

Dustin rubs his neck, because even if Mike wants to talk about it, it's not going to be an easy talk.

"Listen, I know how you feel about Will," he finally says. Mike stops walking and looks at him in complete shock, but he doesn't tell Dustin to stop so he keeps going. "I know you don't feel the same way about Will than about us and that it's not because he's your best friend. I think it's great that you like him and all the things you do for him. I know you would also have taken us away from Hawkins if we asked you but, damn, Mike, you organized a *two months trip* for him. So... yeah. If you wanna talk about it I'm here. And, if you don't, I swear I'm not going to bring it up again."

For a moment, neither of them talk. Mike still looks shocked and

Dustin wants to know how his friend feels about what he just said before talking again.

Finally, Mike sighs, rubbing his eyes. He has a small smile, though, so Dustin relaxes a little.

"I'm that obvious?," Mike asks, resuming his walk.

"Obvious? Nah, I'm just a very observant person. Oblivious? My friend, there isn't a word in the English language to describe how oblivious you are."

They laugh and Mike shakes his head.

"I... you're really okay with it?"

"You liking Eleven, you liking Will, both is the same to me. Which means that my rule of "don't make out in front of me" also applies to both of you."

"I don't think that's gonna be a problem," Mike says, but before Dustin can say anything, he keeps going. "I don't know, Dustin. I just... I like him *so much*, you know? It's... it's not like when I liked Eleven or Christine, but at the same time it is. I really liked them, that was real, but with Will... Jesus, I don't know how to explain it," he laughs, messing his own hair.

Dustin smiles, sympathetic, and pats him in the arm. He hasn't really liked someone yet, so all this romantic stuff is a little rhetoric to him, but he does know his friends.

"I want him to be happy. I want to *make* him happy. Does that make sense? It's... when I look at him, I can't stop thinking how amazing he is, how much would I like to kiss him, but also just hug him or hold his hand. He's so amazing and smart and...", Mike stops, shaking his head. He sighs. "It doesn't matter. He doesn't like me like that."

This is the part where this gets tricky. Because, sure, they all know Will is gay, but they hadn't actually *talked* about it, so bringing it up it's kinda weird.

Dustin can see the gas station in the distance and makes a choice.

"You don't know that. I can't be sure, of course, but I have the feeling Will might like you back. I mean... he is gay."

"Gay doesn't mean interested in me," Mike says bitterly and, ok, he has a fair point.

"Now that I said it I hear how it sounds, but that's not what I wanted to said. I said the gay thing in case your doubts were of him liking guys..."

"They weren't. I mean, I don't know, you know?"

"Uh..."

Mike laughs, almost hysteric.

"I don't make sense. It's just... I thought about telling him, you know? For the last year I've been thinking about telling him. But it never seems like the right time. He has his panic attacks, and the hallucinations and the problems with his father. I can't tell him. I can't add another point to the list of things he has to worry about."

They're almost at the gas station, but now it seems like Dustin opened a door that can't be closed again so easily. That's good. God only knows how much all of them need to talk.

"And at the same time, I can't stop wondering... what if he does like me back?," continues Mike, still messing with his hair, a habit that he picked up from Steve. "I know that "true love" doesn't fix shit, but it *does* make things a little more bearable. What if he does like me back and we can start going out and, I mean, we're already there for each other, but it's not the same. And sometimes I just want to hug him. Not even in a... a *sexual* way," he says, blushing, "just hug him for a long time and lie with him in my bed and stay like that for hours. I just... God, Dustin, I love him so much."

Mike sobs and Dustin grabs him by the arm and gives him a tight hug. Mike it's taller than Dustin, so it's kinda awkward, but it works.

They've always been kind of comfortable touching each other, but Dustin kinda gets what Mike is talking about. He knows that, even if a hug from him it's welcomed, it's not the same that it would be with

Will.

Dustin asks himself if some day he's going to feel about someone the way Mike feels about Will. He doesn't really know if that sounds good.

"Unrequited love sucks," says Mike, his voice muffled against Dustin t-shirt.

"You don't know if it's unrequited."

"And I'm not sure if I want to find out."

They separate, Mike rubbing his eyes to force the tears away. To be honest, Dustin feels like crying too. He just wants all of them to be happy, is that a lot to ask?

"I get what you're saying. And, yes, it looks like bad timing to tell him now. But, be honest with me, do you think that there would be *ever* something like 'a good time'? Our lives hadn't exactly been a walk in the park lately and I don't think they would even be again. But, again, if you're not sure of telling him, don't do it. I mean..."

"You mean you don't know what I should do either," says Mike, giving him a small smile.

Dustin chuckles. "Don't be an asshole. I think you should tell him. But, yeah, I don't know either."

Later, when they're filling the fuel container they brought, Mike talks to him again.

"Thanks, Dustin. I... I really needed that."

Dustin grins at him. "Always. What are friends for?"

The sun is already setting when they came back from the gas station. There's nobody in the route and that's a blessing, because Mike can't believe what he is watching.

“What are you *doing?*,” he asks.

“Oh, you’re back,” says Eleven, sitting in the truck’s ceiling with Lucas.

Eleven is wearing her swimsuit and Lucas’s only shorts and while that’s already weird enough, Eleven is also levitating their towels above both of them.

“They’re tanning,” says Will, inside the truck. “But the sun was bothering them so Eleven improvised an umbrella. I told them it was a bad idea.”

“Snitch,” accuses him Eleven, but she doesn’t stop levitating the towels.

“What took you so long? We’re hungry,” adds Lucas.

“Oh, sorry we couldn’t walk faster under the sun in the middle of the desert,” Dustin says, rolling his eyes and opening the truck’s fuel tank to pour the fuel.

“It’s okay, man, we forgive you,” says Lucas, making Eleven laugh and starting a bickering session between Dustin and Lucas.

Mike shakes his head and goes to the backseat, where Will makes space to let him in. Mike opens his bag and gives Will a chocolate bar, winking at him.

“You’re the only one who isn’t bickering at us, so you get your chocolate bar first.”

“Yay!,” says Will, laughing.

He looks so happy that Mike’s heart clenches a little. What he said to Dustin is true: he loves Will so much he doesn’t know what to do with himself half the time. In moments like this he would really like to cuddle next to him and just watch him enjoy the chocolate.

He’s getting kind of pathetic.

“Why aren’t you with El and Lucas?,” he asks, trying to change his

track of mind.

Will shrugs. "Too hot. Also, I might not get a sunburn as easily as you, but I'm still pretty pale. And it was hard to climb to the ceiling."

"How did they exactly *get* onto the ceiling?," Mike says, because seriously, *how*.

"Telekinesis," explains Will, shrugging again and that makes a lot of sense. "I don't like it."

No, Will doesn't like telekinesis or anything that has to do with his own powers. Which actually reminds Mike of something. He ponders if it's a good time to ask, and he finally decides to give it a shot.

"Right. I actually wanted to ask you something about that."

"About telekinesis? It's when you move something with your mind," Will says, smirking at him.

"Ha, ha, you're so funny, smartass," he says, shoving Will a little and messing with his hair. Will laughs and Mike can't help smiling. "It's about the last tests they make you do in the lab."

Will doesn't stop smiling, but his smiles does slightly fade.

"Oh?"

"We don't have to talk about it if you don't want to. But... you know. I just wanted to ask."

Will sighs. He squeezes Mike hand and smiles again at him.

"It's okay. I think. I mean, I don't have a problem talking about that with you. But, um, if it's too much I tell you and we stop, right?"

"Of course," he tells Will. They remain silent a moment, the sound of Lucas and Dustin bickering outside helping them relax. "What did they make you do this time? You were exhausted, but you got to do everything in one go *and* without problems, for what El said."

Will bites his lip, fidgeting with his fingers, not looking at Mike. He

doesn't seem upset, at least not yet, but he looks somewhat nervous.

"It wasn't... It wasn't anything weird or new. Kind of what they always make me do: move this, light up that, smell this blood, close your eyes and tell me what you see, *open* your eyes and tell me what you see... kind of what they always make me do."

"But?," he asks.

Will sighs.

"When we ask them about the trip, they told us that we could come as long as our test were good. And... and I knew I had to nail them. I didn't want to be the reason we didn't have this. It's hard for me, I'm not like Eleven. She is way stronger than me and I'm too screwed up to control my powers..."

"Will, you're *not* screwed up," he says, getting closer to Will and putting his arms in Will's shoulders.

Will shakes his head. "I am, I know that I am."

"No, you're..."

"Let me finish, please?," Will stops him, so Mike shut ups and nods. "I didn't come back right, you know that, and you can't deny it. I'm not... I'm not how I used to be. And I'm scared of what I can do, the thing I could become if I get out of control. But... but I wanted this. I wanted to be here with you. With our friends. I wanted to get away from Hawkins for my sake, yes, but for *all* of us too. I'm not the only one that is not like he used to be. *We* needed this. And if that meant that I had to make an extra effort then... then I'm okay with that."

Will is shaking a little, but he looks directly in Mike's eyes. He looks so determined and Mike is so in love with him the only thing he can do is hug him. Will squeaks, surprised, but quickly hugs him back.

"You're amazing, Will Byers."

Will giggles and they stay like that, tightly hugging, until their friends storm into the truck saying how tired and hungry they are.

Eleven ends up driving to the nearest motel, with Lucas riding shotgun. Mike is too tired to drive and he ends up in the backseat between Will and Dustin, the last one drooling against the window.

Mike and Will's hands are really close and all Mike needs to do is move his hand a little and they would be holding hands.

He doesn't.

He's going to talk about how he feels with Will in the future but for now the only thing they need is to enjoy this trip.

It's already nighttime when they reach a little town called Elkhart on the side of the road. The town has a motel with just one room left, so they bundle up in two beds: Lucas and Will in the single bed and Dustin, Eleven and Mike in the double bed.

The owner gives them a weird look, but doesn't say anything when he gives them the key.

"Do you think he believes you are dating all of us?," Dustin asks her and Eleven looks at him kind of horrified.

"Yuck. I don't want to suck faces with you."

"You already sucked faces with Mike," Lucas points out.

"I thought we all agreed to never talk about that again," says Mike.

The motel doesn't sell food, so they go to the only restaurant in town. It has a total of eight tables, with just only one free, so they once again end huddle up in a tiny space.

"I love you guys, but I think I need space," says Dustin, scrunched between Lucas and Eleven.

They order a pizza and, thank God, it's delicious. Then again, they're so hungry that if the waitress had brought them an old boot with bad cheese on top they would have devoured it either way.

After eating, they burrow the motel's phone and call home.

Will is the first one to talk with Joyce but, after almost ten minutes, he pass the phone to Eleven.

"Hi, honey!," Joyce greets her and Eleven can't help smiling.

"Hi, Joyce."

"How is everything going?"

She tells her everything, from their visit at the Shedd Aquarium to having to stay in a crowded bed because they forgot to fill the fuel tank. Will has already told Joyce half of this, but the woman hears everything Eleven says, laughing and scolding her in the right parts.

"How was Terry?," Joyce asks after a while. She doesn't say "your mother" and Eleven is really grateful for that.

"She was okay. I told her I'm not going to be home for two months."

"Do you want me to check on her?"

Eleven bites her lip, playing with the phone cord.

"If... if you don't mind..."

"Of course I don't mind, honey. You're a very brave girl, have I ever told you that?"

Eleven laughs. "Yes, you have. It must be the company. I live with a very brave woman, you know?"

When they're already huddle up in bed, Eleven thinks of his mother, the *idea* of his mother. She knows Terry is her mother, that she fought to bring her back. But, if she has to be honest, is not Terry who pops into her mind when she thinks about her mother.

Sighing, she turns to the side, trying not to fall out of the bed. Thank God she doesn't have to be honest.

5. Chapter 4: We will find a way through the dark

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks again to everyone that left a comment! I can't explain how much it means to me <3 It doesn't need to be a long comment (although I love those too), something short is a lot too. Feedback is more than encouraged, anything you see that I could improve please tell me.

Chapter's title taken from *Through the dark*, by One Direction.

When Lucas wakes up, Will has stolen all the blankets and is sleeping in a cocoon of bedsheets and pillows. He doesn't know how Will doesn't suffocate with this heat and all that extra warmth, but he knows that's had to do with how safe he feels hidden beneath the blankets.

He spoons Will, which feels like spooning a giant tortilla, and squeezes him hard.

"Wakey wakey, Sleeping Burrito!," he says, making Will groan.

"If I could take my hands out of the blankets, I would slap you," Will tells him, squirming and trying to get Lucas away. He fails.

"You're such a buzzkill in the mornings, Byers."

"Leave Will alone," mumbles a sleepy Mike from the other bed, throwing a pillow at Lucas.

Eventually they all wake up and get up, taking turns to brush their teeth and take a quick shower. They don't have a check out time, so they take their time and don't stress over forgetting something in their hurry like the day before.

There's a bakery two blocks from the motel, so they go there to get breakfast. The owners are an old married couple that make an amazing apple pie and who say Lucas reminds them of his grandson,

so they gift them with hot chocolate and candy for their drive to St. Louis.

They resume the journey at quarter to 11. By now they kind of have designated seats: in the front of the truck rides Mike, who drives, with Will in the passenger seat. Meanwhile, in the backseat, Lucas seats behind Mike, Dustin in the middle and Eleven behind Will.

Sometimes, if Mike is tired, Lucas or Eleven take the wheel, because they also have their licences. Will didn't thought it was a good idea to trust him with a car and Dustin have failed his exams already three times. When Lucas is the one driving, Eleven or Dustin ride in the passenger seat. When is Eleven the one who drives, the passenger seat goes to Lucas or Mike.

They take turns choosing the music and right now is Dustin's turn, who is kind of obsessed with Rick Astley.

"Together forever and never to part, together forever we twooooo!," sing loudly and badly Dustin and Eleven, using an empty bottle of water as a microphone.

"You sound like dying dogs," laughs Will, taking a photo of them.

"You just wait and see, we're going to be the next Richard and Karen Carpenter. You're going to be begging us for an autograph when we're rich and famous," says Dustin and Eleven nods enthusiastically.

"Weren't the Carpenters brother and sister?," asks Mike.

"That's a minor detail. Hardly matters."

Lucas rolls his eyes, but smiles looking at his friends making fools of themselves. They're having fun and a small part of him is scared something bad is about to happen.

They're not used to be having a good time for so long without something bad happening to them. There's always a monster, an evil corporation, a crazy axe murderer. More or less supernatural, more or less mundane, something always happens and brings them back to the hard reality in which they live.

“Lady and gentlemen, good afternoon. This is your captain speaking,” says Mike, turning down the music and being met by booing on Dustin and Eleven side. “First I’d like to welcome everyone on Mrs. Maraoki Truck Drive 86A. We are currently cruising at an altitude of 0 feet at a speed of 50 miles per hour. The time is 12:25 pm. The weather looks hot but good and with the tailwind on our side we are expecting to arrive at St. Louis approximately fifteen minutes ahead of schedule. We would tell you the weather in St. Louis, passengers, but we aren’t catching a local radio. We hope it’s clear and sunny, though.”

Will giggles and looks at Mike like if he’s the funniest man on Earth. Lucas exchanges a look with Eleven, who rolls her eyes, and both of them smile.

“If the weather cooperates we should get a great view of the city as we drive into the city,” Mike continues, ignoring them. “The cabin crew will be coming around in about twenty minutes time to offer you a light snack and beverage, which currently is just Doritos and cranberry juice. I know, disgusting,” Mike adds when Dustin grimaces. “I’ll talk to you again before we reach our destination. Until then, sit back, relax and enjoy the rest of the flight. Drive. Whatever.”

Will giggles again and they all clap, while Mike grins at them through the rear-view mirror.

Lucas knows at some point they’re going to have problems. And not just running out of fuel, but real problems. But, until that happens, he’s going to enjoy every laugh they can have.

They drive through the Poplar Street Bridge at half past two, a full hour later than expected. It’s not Eleven’s fault that all the cranberry juice she drank made her want to pee every twenty minutes.

She looks through the window at the Mississippi River, completely awed.

“So pretty,” she says.

“Did you know that the Mississippi River either borders or passes through the states of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana. That makes it the fourth longest river *in the world*,” Lucas says enthusiastically.

“Nerd,” coughs Dustin, making Eleven laugh.

Lucas rolls his eyes. “Look, it’s the pot calling the kettle black.”

Dustin sticks his tongue out at Lucas, who does the same to him. Eleven rolls her eyes: she’s surrounded by children. To think that once upon a time they were more competent human beings than her...

They decide to have lunch first and then go find an hotel. They plan to stay in St. Louis for three or four days, travel around the city, rest, and then resume the travel. They have just a few places they’re sure they want to visit, the rest is going to be walking and discovering.

Dustin picks a restaurant and there they go, hungry and thirsty.

“How can you be thirsty?,” Mike at her as they walk into the restaurant. “You drank almost all the cranberry juice.”

“Yes, and later I proceed to pee almost all the cranberry juice. It’s out if my system now.”

“That’s not how the human body works,” Mike says, rolling his eyes.

“Well I’m not totally human, Wheeler, so stop bothering me.”

Mike shakes his head, but he is smiling. He throws an arm around her shoulders and squeezes her, making her laugh.

They decide to try the local dishes, so Eleven orders toasted ravioli, while Lucas orders something called a “slinger” and Dustin a Gerber sandwich. Will and Mike order a St. Louis-style BBQ, Will with pork steak and Mike with St. Louis-style ribs.

“Oh my God, this is delicious,” says Lucas, practically swallowing everything on his plate.

“Whoever thought of deep frying ravioli was a genius,” Eleven adds, because *damn* this food is exquisite.

“Can I marry these ribs?,” asks Mike.

“Ew, your face is all dirty with bbq sauce,” says Lucas, scrunching his nose.

“Gross,” Eleven agrees, slurping soda.

Will roll his eyes. “Right, because you look really pretty right now gobbling up your food. Here, Mike, have a napkin.”

“Thanks, Will.”

They smile at each other and Eleven tries hard not to roll her eyes. She kind of understand why the two of them aren’t together yet, but she still thinks they’re being dumb. She’s sure they would be a lot happier if they just confessed to each other and got together.

“How is yours, Will?,” asks Mike.

“Yummy. I even think I’m going to finish it up.”

Eleven smiles. Will has been eating a lot more since they started the trip. Sure, he still doesn’t eat a lot, but now he actually does every meal and his face looks healthier.

It looks like this trip is actually working.

They go to an hotel in front of the Tower Grove Park. It’s an old building that smells like naphthalene, but it’s otherwise nice. They get a suite with two bedrooms and a small living room, with view to the park. They don’t expend as much in it as they first thought they would, so that’s a plus.

This time the sleeping arrangements go like this: Dustin and Will in one bedroom, Eleven, Mike and Lucas in the other. Mike thinks that they’re probably going to end up all sleeping in the living room at least one night, but he likes sleepovers so he doesn’t say anything.

The first day in St. Louis they spend it in their suit, watching a *Star Trek: The Next Generation* marathon. Mike's tired from driving, so he uses Lucas' lap as a pillow and takes a nap that lasts at least two episodes.

When he wakes up, the Enterprise is entering a neutral zone to investigate the distress call of a Talarian freighter and Mike thinks is a good time to call it a day and go grab something for dinner.

"It's like the only thing we did the last three days is driving and eating," complains Dustin.

They go to a pizza shop near Compton Hill Reservoir Park and order two big pizzas with as many toppings as they can put in it.

"Oh my God, the food here is delicious," says Dustin after giving his first bite.

"See? That's why we're just driving and eating," says Mike, and for once everyone agrees.

"Tomorrow I want to go to the Missouri Botanical Garden. It has a 14 acre Japanese strolling garden; a geodesic dome conservatory; a children's garden, including a pioneer village; a playground; and the Linnean House, which is said to be the oldest continually operated greenhouse west of the Mississippi River!," says enthusiastically Dustin, a piece of cheese sliding down his chin.

"Nerd," coughs Lucas, making Eleven choke on her soda, a fit of laughter overcoming her.

Mike snorts, with such bad luck that there's soda coming out his nose and that hurts. His friends laugh at him and he can't help blushing.

"I hate all of you."

"You love us, Wheeler," says Will, still laughing. He looks beautiful, as always.

"Yes, I do."

He should have know that it was too good to be true.

He is in the forest again, alone. He doesn't know how he got back to Hawkins when he was just having dinner with his friends in Missouri.

The woods are dark, shadows pooling around the trees, creating a sea of blackness that grows by the second, swallowing everything in sight. Will feels that darkness pooling inside of him, too, and he is terrified.

He's alone and not at the same time. There's someone... *something* out there, he can feel it. But the trees are dead, the flowers are dead. Is he dead?

No, he can't be. If he were dead he wouldn't notice how alone and scared he is. He wouldn't feel that darkness that grows inside of him, tearing everything else apart, breaking his own humanity. Breaking his sanity. If he were dead, he wouldn't feel cold and he wouldn't feel pain.

Is he in pain? Yes. No. Both. He's not hurt, but everything hurts. Being alive hurts. The darkness filters through his body and he should be dead, but he is not. Why isn't he dead? They should have killed him.

Is he still he? He doesn't feel like himself anymore. He hasn't feel like himself in a long time. He feels different and it's scary and it hurts.

A chilly breeze goes through the trees and he is sure that there's something out there looking for him. Something dark.

He starts running, afraid, terrified. He runs and runs and he doesn't feel his legs like usually. That scares him even more. He tries to cry for help, but he can't. His mouth doesn't work anymore. It hasn't worked in a long time.

Finally, he reaches the lake. Its water is dark in a way water shouldn't be. Can lakes be dead? This one feels dead. Everything in Hawkins feels dead. Everything but him.

He approaches the shore and the water is like a dark mirror, but it's not Will Byers who the reflection shows.

It's the Demogorgon.

He wakes up panting and sweating, tears running through his cheeks. He wants to scream, but he knows he can't. He would wake up his friends and he would ruin the trip. He would ruin everything, like he always does.

He has to go to the bathroom without waking Dustin. He has to move, he has to look normal, he has to...

"Will?," Dustin sleepy voice petrifies him, leaving him in the middle of the bedroom looking like a deer caught in the headlights.

"I...," he starts, but his voice sounds broken and he can feel the tears running down his cheeks.

"Will, what happened?!", Dustin doesn't sound sleepy anymore and in two second he is by Will side.

"I'm... I'm okay," he says, shaking. He tries to sound steady, tries to look normal, but he can't. He can't do anything, he's useless.

"You are not okay, Will. Come here, let's sit down," says Dustin. He looks worried and Will feels terrible for making him feel like that.

"No, I'm okay, I swear. It was... it was just a nightmare. Go back to... go back to sleep, Dustin. I'm going to be okay."

"No," says Dustin. He sounds worried but firm and Will is scared. Why is he scared of his own friends? Why is he scared of everything? "Will, please. Come sit with me," Dustin says, warmly. "You need to talk to someone. I promise I'm not going to judge you and I'm not going to tell anyone. But *please* talk to me."

Will shakes and closes his eyes tightly. He is scared and worried. He is tired.

He nods, opening his eyes. Dustin is smiling gently at him, and he

slowly puts an arm around Will's shoulders, guiding him to his bed. They sit and Dustin waits in silence, until Will is ready to talk.

"I'm having nightmares," he admits, after a while. "I'm... I'm back in the forest. In... in the Upside Down's forest. It's dark and everything is dead and I... I...," he chokes on a sob and closes his eyes again, rocking himself like he always does when he feels like this.

Dustin is silent for a moment, then he talks, carefully. "Can I hug you?"

It takes Will a moment, but he finally nods. Soon enough, Dustin arms are around him, hugging him tightly.

"It's okay, Will. I'm here with you. You can take your time. I'm not going anywhere. You can cry if you want, it's okay."

And Will cries, then. He cries and sobs, hot tears running through his cheeks. Dustin doesn't say anything, just hugs him, tracing soothing circles in his back. Will feels exhausted, too many sleepless nights, too many monsters piled up inside and outside him.

He's not sure for how long he cries. Maybe is five minutes, maybe it's an hour. He cries until there's not even a single tear more left inside him, until his cheeks are damp. He feels tired, but in some extrange sort of way he also feels at ease.

"I... I feel better now," he croaks, his voice still broken but steadier.

"You sure?"

"Y-yeah. I haven't let myself cry like that since... I don't know. I actually think I never let myself cry like that before," he admits. "I mean, I do cry. Sometimes I feel like I cry all the time but... But it's more like a thing I can't control?," he laughs, then, humorless, "I don't think that even makes sense."

Dustin squeezes his shoulder. "Yes, it does. Wanna talk now?"

Will bites his lip, but finally nods.

"It's like I... like I said before. I'm back in the Upside Down's forest,

running. I know something is deeply wrong with me in the dream... no," he stops himself. He's going to be honest. He doesn't look at Dustin when he talks again. "It's not just a dream. It's... a memory. Of when... when I was transforming in the Demogorgon."

As soon as the words leave his mouth, he feels something shatter inside himself. He sniff, but doesn't cry. He doesn't feel like crying anymore. He's drained.

He hadn't talk about that time, ever. As soon as he woke up in the Lab's infirmary after Hopper injected the antidote on him and brought him back from the Upside Down, he stopped talking about all those horrible months.

Dr. Grantt had tried bringing the issue in his sessions, but that usually ends in Will having a panic attack and things flying. His mother, Jonathan and Steve had tried talking to him about it too, but they gave up after a couple of times when they saw how that topic left Will.

Dustin knows how Will feels about talking of that time, so he keeps silent and lets Will talk.

"I know that the antidote worked. I mean, intellectually I know it: that the only aftereffect of that time are the... the powers, but that I'm not transforming into the Demogorgon anymore. I know it but... but sometimes I feel like I still turning into it. Like I never stopped mutating into it, that one day I'm going to wake up, look myself in the mirror and see the Demogorgon.

"And when I finally calm down," he keeps going, still not looking at Dustin, "when I'm finally sure I'm still myself... I can hear Dr. Wilkes voice telling me how wonderful I am. How I just need to give my humanity up and how he is going to help me with that. How... how he is going to kill all of you so I can be just his weapon. How he is everything I need."

He finally look ups at Dustin. Dustin, his friend, his brother. The boy is looking sad, but he tries to give Will a reassuring smile.

"I'm scared. I'm afraid of turning into the Demogorgon; I'm afraid of

hurting someone with my powers; I'm scared of waking up in the Upside Down again; I'm scared of discovering Wilkes is not really dead but coming for me. I'm *terrified*. All the time. I have hallucinations of being in the Upside Down, of the Demogorgon, you guys kinda know that. I have nightmares that don't let me sleep. I'm tired all the time. I'm never hungry and I even feel like throwing up when I eat. I... I am *so tired*."

They stay in silence once more. And Will is tired but, for the first time in *years*, he also feels like he has taken a heavy weight out of his heart.

Finally, Dustin talks.

"It's okay to feel like that, Will. You went through hell and back, it's just normal that you feel like that. And... and it's obvious that is not easy for you to keep all that to yourself, that's why you need to *talk* with someone. I know you don't fully trust Dr. Grantt, but if not with her at least talk with us, with you mom, with Jonathan, with *anyone*," says Dustin.

Will bites his lips, guilty.

"It's just... I don't want to be a nuisance for you guys. I know I'm useless, and I already cause you a lot of trouble, I don't want you to have to listen to all the things my screwed up head thinks."

Dustin sighs.

"First of all: you're not a screwed up. No, you're not," Dustin says, when Will tries to refute. "I understand how you feel, and I'm not saying what you are feeling isn't valid. Because *it is* valid. You feel like shit and I'm not going to tell you that's a lie, because it's not. But even if you feel like you're fucked up, you are not. And you are so not a problem from us. Will, you are our *friend*. We didn't just went looking for you the first time because we felt like it was our duty, but because we love you and we were worried about you and we wanted you back.

"And, like I told you," continues Dustin, "I know it's not easy to talk. But, please, believe me when I tell you that we don't have a problem

with you telling us how you feel. We're not going to think less of you, we're not going to petty you, and we're not going to think it's a bother that you tell us how you feel. I'm not going to tell you how *you* should feel, but please believe when I tell you how *we* feel. And what we feel is a huge love for you and that we want to do everything in our power to make you feel better, even if all we can do is just listen."

Dustin hugs him again before continuing. "And I get that you feel like you are useless, but you are so not. Even with everything that's going on in your life you have a 4.0 GPA *and* a job. Again, I'm not telling you that it's not valid how you feel but, you know. Just laying some facts. Because we are men of science and love facts."

And Will can't help laughing, because this are his friends. Always trying to make him feel better when he is in his lowest.

Dustin gives him a grin.

"See? Now you're smiling. That's good."

"Thanks, Dustin," Will says, sincerely. "You're amazing."

Dustin shrugs, still smiling. "I'm just the regular one."

Will gapes at him, forgetting his sadness for a second. "What? You're not the regular one!"

Dustin rolls his eyes.

"Will, please let's not make this about me."

"But you are not the regular one!"

"God, why are you so difficult, Byers?," Dustin jokes. "Listen, it's okay. You and Eleven can make things float with your minds, Lucas has Rambo fighting skills and Mike is James Bond when he has a gun in his hands. Someone had to be the regular one and I really don't have a problem with that someone being me."

Will shakes his head, because that's so wrong. He smiles, then, a little mischievous.

"I'm not saying what you feel isn't valid," he quotes Dustin, making the boy snort, "but you are so not the regular one. We all are the brain of the team but, Dustin, you are our heart. When everything else falls apart, you are the one who pulls us back together again. You are... you are Lucy Pevensie, and Barry Allen, and Bones McCoy. You are *amazing*. Maybe you're not the physically stronger one, or the superpowered one, but under no concept you are the regular one."

Dustin smiles at him, at mix of amusement and contentment in his features.

"See, Byers? Always putting the others first. But it's okay, I'm going to take your words. I'm not the regular one, I'm the heart," says Dustin, and Wills smiles. "You feeling a little better?"

He takes a second and finally nods.

"Yeah. A lot, actually. Quite sleepy, thought."

Dustin laughs. "That's good. Let's sleep, then. But, Will?"

"Yeah?"

"If you don't want to, I'm not going to tell anyone. But I do think you should tell the others what you told me."

Will bites his lips, a little nervous. He feels anxious just thinking of telling all his friends this, even of repeating it to Dustin again. But he nods.

"You're right. I'm... tomorrow morning, before we go out, I'm going to talk with all of you."

Dustin smiles, reassuring, before squeezing his hand a little and getting up from Will's bed.

"That's good. And if tomorrow you don't feel like going out, we can spend the day here. This is a vacation, we don't need to do anything we don't feel like."

A couple minutes later, when they're both lying in their own beds again, Will turns to look at Dustin.

“Are you still awake?”

“Yes. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. It’s just... thanks, Dustin.”

He can’t see Dustin through the bedroom darkness, but he can hear his smile when he answer. “Always, buddy.”

That morning they spend it in the suite’s living room, the five of them snuggled up in the couch, Will in the middle.

Will talks and they listen and by the end of it they're all a little teary eyed, but that's okay.

Will talks about being trapped in the Upside Down, about how scared he was while morphing into the Demogorgon. He talks about being trapped in his own head, about his nightmares, about feeling useless. They let him vent, take everything out.

Mike bites his tongue the entire time, swallowing every “that’s not true” and each “don’t say that about yourself”. This is not about him and how he feels about Will.

It’s hard, though. It’s hard because Will says lots of horrible things about himself and Mike just wants to hug him tighter and make him understand how amazing he is. Mike wants to swear to Will that he is going to scare away every monster, to kill every man that tries to put his hands in Will.

But it’s not about him. He knows that he can’t kiss away Will’s problems. And he doesn’t want to do that, either. He wants to be here for Will and do everything he can, even if it hurts him seeing how Will thinks of himself.

Afterwards, by Will’s request, they go have a picnic at Tower Grove Park. They buy bread, cheese, ham, peanut butter and jelly and make loads of sandwiches. Lucas and Eleven make a demonstration of their magic act and Dustin sings “Material Girl” while they clap to the beat. Mike doesn't have a cool trick to perform, so he just sits behind

Will, letting the boy rest against his chest. Mike gives him a hair massage, smiling every time Will lets out a comforted sound.

In the afternoon, they go to the Missouri Botanical Garden. They walk through yards and yards of beautiful plants and flowers, with Dustin telling them every little detail about the place and its nature.

“... then, after retiring, Henry Shaw returned to St. Louis in 1851. He hired George Barnett to design and build Tower Grove House, which became his estate. Then, working with leading botanists Shaw planned, funded *and* built what would become this beautiful place, the Missouri Botanical Garden, on the land around his home. But, as the garden became more and more extensive, Shaw decided to open it to the general public in 1859.”

“Sounds like a cool guy,” say Will, taking pictures of everything he likes. Mike, using the camera that Nancy gave him, takes the chance to snap a picture of *Will* taking pictures.

He looks beautiful like this: surrounded by nature to left and right, a focused look on his face, his tongue peeking out of his mouth, the camera in his hands. He looks like something out of a fairytale: something precious and stunning.

He wants to hold Will's hand. He doesn't, though. But he does put an arm around Will shoulders, winks at him, gesturing with his head towards Dustin.

“So, Dustin, tell us more about this Shaw guy.”

“Of course! Did you know he donated additional land adjoining the garden to the city of St. Louis for Tower Grove Park? He also helped with its construction, including the pavilions and various works of art.”

“Wonderful,” he says, solemnly, and Will giggles.

“You know, I can tell you are making fun of me, but jokes on you, because you're still hearing me,” says Dustin, sticking his tongue at them.

“Then jokes on you, too, because we do like hearing you,” says Mike.

“Aww, guys.”

“Even if what you’re saying is boring,” adds Will and Mike laughs.

“Aaand you had to ruin it. That’s it: for now on I’m making a vow of silence,” says Dustin, gesturing a zipper around his mouth.

A total of thirty seconds pass before Eleven says, smirking, “So, Dustin, what can you tell us about this Japanese strolling garden?”

“Okay, you win. Silence is boring anyway. You see, this garden is called Seiwa-en and is the largest Japanese strolling garden in North America. Can you believe it?!”

Dustin keeps talking, excited, and Mike steals a glance at Will. The boy is smiling again and he looks really happy, not just faking it.

Mike knows things aren’t going to be rainbows and butterflies from now on, but he isn’t here just for that. Even if Will doesn’t like him back, he is going to be there for him through everything: ups and downs, laughs and tears, happiness and sadness. He knows he is not always going to know what to do, and that he is going to fuck up at times. But this is worth it.

Will is worth it.

They are worth it.

Dustin’s Amazing Checklist - Sorcerer Edition

°At least four changes of underwear (yes, that include bras)

°Shampoo

°Brush

°Two hairbands

°At least three t-shirts (no, Will’s t-shirts doesn’t count, bring your own)

°Sleeping bag (see above)

°Crowbar

°Sunscrean

°At least two shorts

- °At least one skirt
- °At least one everyday dress
- °Pads
- °A formal dress (just in case we have the opportunity to have dinner at a fancy restaurant)
- °Formal shoes (see above)
- °At least one cap
- °Sunglasses
- °Steel daga
- °Swimsuit (bikini or one piece, what makes you feel more comfortable)
- °Pyjamas
- °At least two pairs of pants
- °Sneakers
- °Two books that you have not read yet
- °Three cassettes with whatever music you want (No, it can't be two hours of *Welcome to the Jungle*)
- °Snacks
- °A water bottle
- °Your Dungeons & Dragons costume
- °Card deck

Eleven checks both sides of her list, making sure she's not forgetting to pack anything. This time they woke up early, so they have time to shower and clean a little before checking out.

"You two know there's housekeeping in the hotel, right?," Lucas says, watching Dustin and Eleven clean up the the dinner leftovers from the living room.

"So what? This way we make their jobs easier, there's nothing wrong with that," says Dustin.

Lucas rolls his eyes, but helps them clean anyways. Mike is showering and Will is putting all his things in his suitcase. He had already done it early, but Dustin found out that he didn't use the checklist, so he made Will remake his suitcase.

"What I like most about hotels," says Mike, coming out of the bathroom. He is already changed, but his hair is still damp and wetting his shirt, "is the showers. Seriously, they're way better than

the shower in my house. Next time we have to get one with a bathtub. I want to take a bubble bath.”

“Oh, me too!,” say excited Will, coming out of the bedroom and carrying his suitcase.

“That’s something I would have expected of Dustin, to be honest,” says Lucas, making Eleven giggle.

“Hey!”

“But sure, we can get a hotel with a bathtub. Although, you know what would be cool?,” asks Lucas, a mischievous smile in his lips, “A jacuzzi!”

Eleven, Mike and Will let out a awed “oooh” that makes Lucas puff out his chest in proud.

“Totally cool and totally expensive, too,” says Dustin, rolling his eyes. “We do have money saved, but we’re not the Rockefeller family.”

“Boo, you’re a buzzkill!,” jeers Lucas, smirking.

“You’re enjoying this moment, right?”

“You have no idea.”

Eleven rolls her eyes and reminds them that, while they do have time left, they should be leaving the suite already.

The four days they spent in St. Louis were fun. After going to the Missouri Botanical Garden in the first day, they went to have dinner to a good enough restaurant where they eat fancy French food. Well, at least for them was fancy, to everyone else seemed to be pretty normal.

In their second day they went sightseeing. They took photos in the Gateway Arch, walked alongside the Mississippi River shore, had a picnic at Compton Hill Reservoir Park, then went to a mall to take advantage of the AC.

The second day, and after almost an hour of begging on Mike’s side,

they went to Forest Park. They visited the Saint Louis Zoo, had yet another picnic in the park, then went to the Saint Louis Science Center and finally to the Missouri History Museum. They took a bunch of photos and had history lesson with a very enthusiastic Mike that had them all yawning.

"I love history so much," said the boy at one point or another.

"We noticed," deadpanned Eleven, making Lucas giggle.

The third they they came back to Forest Park to visit the Saint Louis Art Museum, something that Eleven liked way more than the History Museum. Then they went to The Muny to watch a Shakespeare play that Eleven actually enjoyed and later went to have lunch at a pretty diner in front of the park. Finally they went to The Jewel Box, a big greenhouse that had Dustin on cloud nine.

The fourth day they spent it almost entirely in the suite, watching movies and eating takeaway. Eleven wholly enjoyed that day. As much as she likes going to new places and watching new things, she adores the time she has to spend with her best friends.

And that takes us to the present, where she is commanding said friends to go and have breakfast so they can leave the hotel and keep going with their trip.

"Please, let's not forget to fill the tank before we leave St. Louis," begs Dustin, "I can't walk for four hour under the sun again."

"I agree," says Mike, nodding enthusiastically while eating scrambled eggs.

At 10 o'clock their check out of the hotel, go to a gas station to fill the tank and then they take the 64 to get out of St. Louis.

"Next stop: Kansas!," shouts Lucas, making Eleven, Dustin and Mike cheer.

"Actually...", says Will, "can we go somewhere else first?"

Dustin groans.

“I know we have time, but you do remember that we have to be at the San Diego Convention Center on August 4, right?”

Will chuckles and for the rear-view mirror Eleven can see how he winks at Mike.

“I know, I know. Trust me. This is going to be good.”

Eleven tries really hard not to roll her eyes. Great, they’re going to see a big romantic gesture. She doesn’t know what, but she is sure of it.

She smiles, in the end. Yeah, maybe Mike and Will are two dorks, but they’re are *her* dorks and she is happy that they’re finding something good in each other.

“Okay, Byers, tell me where to go,” says Mike.

“Next stop: Who Knows Where!,” shouts Lucas, making Eleven, Dustin and Mike cheer and Will laugh.

6. Chapter 5: No man left behind

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks again to everyone that left kudos and especially to those one who left comments!

“Aaaand... here we are!,” says Will happily as they enter a really small town, even smaller than Elkhart.

And that is saying a lot, because Elkhart was a small ass town in Dustin’s opinion.

“Uh, Will? Are we supposed to recognise this place?,” asks Lucas as they all get out of the truck.

“Well, I suppose that you won't. But I'm pretty sure Mike will,” says Will, a big smile on his face. Mike looks confused, so Will adds: “We’re in Florida.”

At that, Mike gasps, covering his mouth with his hands and looking awed at everything in sight. Dustin, for his part, is deeply confused. And, for what he can see, so are Lucas and Eleven.

“Uh, guys? Care to explain? Because I’m pretty sure Florida is a state in the south of the United States, not a small town in Missouri.”

“I can’t believe I didn’t recognize the route!,” says Mike, completely ignoring him, “I should have noticed it! Oh, my God, Will, you’re amazing!”

Mike hugs Will, lifting him off the floor and making the boy laugh. Dustin is still confused, by the way. Well, maybe not confused of those two being so overly affectionate with each other and doing what he is almost 80% sure is a romantic gesture.

“Guys, where are we?,” asks Lucas, clearly as confused as Dustin.

“In Florida!,” says happily Mike, putting Will down on the floor.

“Yeah, we got that part,” says Eleven, rolling her eyes. “And that’s

important because...?”

“This is where Mark Twain was born!”

Right, that makes a lot of sense.

“Aaaaaah,” they chant, making Mike roll his eyes.

“He is my favorite writer! I mean, besides Tolkien, of course. I can’t believe we’re here!”

Turns out Mark Twain was born on a small ass town, with barely 0.1 square miles and less than fifty people living in it. Mike manages to spend an entire photographic film taking pictures of the place, though.

Mike looks *elated* to be here, not only taking pictures but also telling them all about the town and Mark Twain.

“So Mark Twain used to say that Florida was a nearly invisible village and that when he was born it contained a hundred people, so he increased the population by 1 per cent. He said that is more than many of the best men in history could have done for a town!”

“You sound really excited saying that, but it’s actually pretty sad,” says Lucas, but Mike ignores him.

Will looks ecstatic, too, but probably for different reasons than Mike. Most precisely, he looks ecstatic *because* of Mike and his mere existence. Ah, to be young and in love...

“Did you know Mark Twain only lived here for just a few years? His family moved to another town called Hannibal when he was five,” says Will, as if he actually cared about Mark Twain and hadn’t read that information on a pamphlet somewhere just to impress Mike.

Which he totally accomplishes, by the euphoric way Mike looks right now.

“Yes! He moved to Hannibal and lived there almost 20 years. He did come to Florida a lot, though. He came to visit his uncle John Quarles and stay at his farm for summer vacations. Actually, those

summer memories and all his interactions with his uncle John house servants formed many of the sketches and perspectives that Mark Twain placed in his novels. Isn't great that we're on one of his inspirational places?!", asks Mike, looking extremely happy at Will, who smiles warmly at him and nods.

"Terrific," says with no inflection Eleven, making Lucas giggle.

"Look! That's Mark Twain Birthplace State Historic Site!," says Mike, sounding like he's about to pee himself from happiness.

"That's a really long name," remarks Lucas, being ignored once again.

"That's where Mark Twain was born!"

"We kinda got that from the title," says Eleven, smirking.

They go to the museum, of course. Mike takes more pictures and they get a guided tour, which is extremely short given the fact that the house is barely two rooms long. By the time they manage to see the handwritten manuscript of "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer", Mike looks about to faint.

To Dustin the whole visit is kind of boring, but worth it for the look on Mike's face. And in Will's too when he looks at Mike. Dustin knows he promised Mike not to pressure the situation, but damn, this two should talk already.

Sure, he's still not completely sure Will reciprocates Mike's feelings, but after today he increased from 75% sure to 87%.

Later, when they're once again in the truck and Eleven is driving with Lucas on his side, Dustin is left in the backseat with Mike and Will. This time he is behind Eleven, with Mike in the middle and Will behind Lucas.

"Thanks again, Will. I really liked it," says Mike and Dustin can't see his face, but he sounds like a lovestruck puppy.

"I'm glad you liked it. You always do so much for me and I wanted to do the same for you, at least once. And I know you love Mark Twain, so even though I actually didn't know where his hometown was I

imagined it was on Missouri,” admits Will, blushing. Dustin acts like he doesn’t care about the conversation, but looks askance at them to not lose anything, “so I checked with the receptionist in our hotel and she told me where we should go and even marked it in the map so I could guide you there. I... you’re amazing, Mike, I just wanted you to be happy.”

Will is looking at Mike with starts in his eyes and now Dustin is 90% sure of his feelings now.

“I’m happy having you next to me,” says Mike, hugging Will, and Dustin would pay to see his face.

From the rear-view mirror Dustin catches Lucas and Eleven rolling their eyes at each other and smiling. He can’t help smile, too. Is good to know he’s not the only one hanging of their friend’s epic love story.

They stay the night in a small motel in the outside of a town called Paris, near Florida.

“Just saying, these towns could have thought of their own names instead of stealing other places names,” says Dustin and Lucas snorts.

“Let me tell that to the Mayor, I’m sure he’s going to change the city’s name as soon as possible.”

They get a room with two single beds, a couch and a double bed. They draw sticks and Mike ends up sleeping in one bed, Eleven in the other, Will in the couch and Lucas and Dustin in the double bed.

They don't want to go out to eat, so Lucas and Will offer themselves to go and buy takeout. Before heading out, Eleven grabs Lucas and hides with him in the bathroom. Lucas has an idea what she wants, but can’t help blush a little thinking of what their friends are going to think.

“You have to use this opportunity to talk with Will about Mike. He is opening up to us and it’s a good time to bring up the topic,” she whispers to him, her face really close to his and Lucas feels his own

face hot.

“Don't you think is too much in little time? Also, why it has to be me? You're almost his sister!”

“And I usually don't get lots of things about how society works, so he might think I don't understand why it isn't easy for him to confess to Mike. Also, you have known him your whole life and you're a boy, so maybe if he sees you're okay with him liking boys he's going to be calmer about this.”

Lucas groans, resting his head against Eleven's shoulder. It's an uncomfortable position because he is almost a head and a half taller than her. She smells nice, but Lucas is distressed at the moment so he tries not to think much of it.

“How would I bring up the topic?”

“You'll figure something out. Look for an opening.”

“You know I'm really bad at talking about feelings,” he says and Eleven pats him in the back.

“You can do this. It's for Will and Mike's sake. I believe in you.”

Lucas snorts, distancing himself from Eleven enough to look at her in the face.

“Great pep talk.”

“Thanks. I'm thinking about being a motivational speaker.”

Lucas laughs and Eleven flashes him a wide smile that makes him hug her again.

“Okay. Let's do this. For the power of love and friendship.”

“For the power of love and friendship!”

When they come out of the bathroom, their friends are seated on the double bed facing the bathroom door. Dustin is looking at them with a raised brow, Will with a smirk and Mike looks simply confused.

"Everything's fine?," asks Will, in a tone that suggest something Lucas better not think about.

"Perfect. Shall we go? I'm kinda hungry."

Will chuckles. "Of course, of course."

They haven't make even one block when Will clears his throat, winking at him.

"So..."

"Oh my God," groans Lucas, hiding his face in his hands.

"No, no, please. Tell me, what were you and El were talking about?," asks Will, wiggling his eyebrows and making Lucas laugh.

"Oh, please *stop*," he says, punching Will heartlessly in the arm. "It's not like that."

"Seriously? Because you two seem to have become closer lately."

Yes, that might be because they had spent the last six months talking about Will and Mike, if they were in love with each other, how could they make them realize they were indeed in love with each... Of course, he can't actually tell Will that. Lucas doesn't think he'll appreciate that.

"Seriously. Besides, it would be weird. Mike and Eleven used to date."

"So what?," asks Will.

"So it would be weird!," he replies, which should be obvious. "And it wouldn't be cool on my side."

"Why wouldn't it be cool? Lucas, we're in the twentieth century, not in some Shakesperian play where you would be insulting your buddy by dating his ex."

"Did that actually happen in a Shakespeare play?," Lucas asks, curious, and Will rolls his eyes, exasperated.

"You are missing the point. And I don't know, Eleven is the theater nerd, not me. The point is, there's nothing wrong if you want to date Eleven. Mike doesn't like Eleven like that anymore, and he isn't an asshole, so you don't have to worry about that."

Lucas is about to insist again that he doesn't like Eleven like that either, but then he gets hit by inspiration and realizes that this is the opening Eleven told him he should look for.

"I know he doesn't like Eleven anymore, but, you know. Like, what would you do if it were you, Will? I mean, not if you liked Eleven, but if you liked one of your friends who used to date another of your friends. What would you think if you liked someone on our group of friends?," he says, trying to not to look too obvious of where he is going with this.

But the look on Will's face, he failed.

Will looks like a deer caught in the headlights and he has stopped walking.

"Um, I mean, ah, I don't like Eleven so let's change the topic. Dustin was right, wasn't he? These towns really should have original names and not..."

"Lucas," Will stops him.

His friend is biting his lip and has his hands clenched in fist, a determined look on his eyes.

"Y-yes, Will?"

"I...", Will starts, but stops, biting his lip again. Will opens his mouth as if to continue, but nothing comes out.

"It's okay, Will. You can tell me anything," Lucas swears, squeezing Will's shoulder.

Will nods, taking a deep breath before looking at Lucas right in the eyes.

“I’m gay.”

The world doesn’t stop, time doesn’t freeze, and a car pass at high speed next to them. Will feels his heart beating fast and he can’t believe he just said that.

It’s something that deep down he always knew. Something *everyone* who knows him knows, but nobody actually talks about it, not to his face. Well, his father has called him a fag and a queer before, but his father is an asshole and he calls everyone he doesn’t like that.

He knows Lucas knows this, that he being gay is just one of those things they all know but don’t talk about. He knows Lucas won’t hate him now that Will said it out loud, and yet...

And yet he can’t help feeling nervous. His hands are sweating and his body is slightly shaking and every fraction of a second feels eternal until Lucas finally smiles warmly at him, squeezing lightly Will’s shoulder again.

“That’s great, Will.”

Will sniffs and feels like crying. He isn’t sad, he’s actually happy and relieved, but he has to blink repeatedly to keep the tears at bay. Lucas hugs him and Will thinks that lately everyone has to hug him a lot to comfort him.

He doesn’t think that’s bad anymore.

“You know I like Mike,” he says and it’s not a question, because that’s obvious.

Lucas pulls apart enough to look at him, still smiling at him but this time looking a little guilty.

“Yeah. Sorry.”

Will shakes his head. “Don’t be sorry. I’m just too obvious.”

“Nah, man. I mean, Eleven and I noticed and I think Dustin too, but I can assure you Mike doesn’t have a clue you like him.”

Will snorts.

“That’s because he is a big oblivious nerd.”

Lucas laughs and they start walking again. Will feels like a huge weight has been lifted from his back. He hasn’t realized how much keeping this a secret was dragging on him.

“True. But, you know. We love him the way he is. You *obviously* do, at least,” says Lucas, winking at him and Will elbows him in the arm, rolling his eyes. “So, are you going to tell him?”

“Uh, are you insane? Why would I tell him?”

“Eh, maybe because I’m pretty sure he likes you back?”

“What?! That’s not... that’s not...!”

That’s most likely true.

Will has saw how Mike looks at him, the things he does for Will. In the beginning, he thought it was just wishful thinking, that his desire to be liked back was taking over the last strings of his sanity and he wasn’t just hallucinating monsters but also boys liking him.

Then, of course, time passed and Mike starting being more and more attentive towards him. And, while Will could blame lots of it in him being “poor little crazy Will”, there were things that didn’t make sense.

An arm lingering too long in his shoulders. A hug that lasted too long. The passenger seat always reserved for him. Chocolate and other goodies given just for the hell of it. Sure, it could still be him watching too much into a tight friendship, or Mike having pity on him, but it looked weird.

But the last few days... Will has grown a lot the last few days. A lot of things has changed on how he perceived himself and his friends. So... yes. He is pretty sure Mike likes him back, too.

That doesn’t mean it would be a good idea, though.

“Will?”

He sighs, trying not to look at Lucas.

“Do you think it would be a good idea?”

“You said that Eleven and I...”

“That’s so not the same,” he says, finally looking at Lucas. His friends is frowning at him, so Will elaborates. “I’m not saying it’s not a good idea because Mike and El used to date. I’m saying it’s not a good idea because I’m a mess.”

Lucas gapes and for a second he looks as if he’s about to tell him he’s wrong, but seems to change his mind last second.

“Look, I’m not saying you don’t have problems. You do. And yes, you have nightmares and... and hallucinations and life has been pretty rough on you. But Mike isn’t exactly okay in the head either. *None* of us are. And, even if he were, I don’t think he minds you not being a, what? Completely normal human being? Does one of those actually exists?”

Will looks away, biting his lip. “It’s just... what if I fuck up? I don’t want to mess our friendship. I couldn’t... I couldn’t do that to Mike. So many people have let him down and I don’t want to be another of the assholes that hurt him, even if I don’t realize what I’m doing.”

“Okay, number one: you are *not* Mike parents. *Or* Christine Sheppard. Because I know you’re thinking of her. Oh, my God, Will, how can you compare yourself to that asshole? She made out with Mike lots of times and then didn’t even acknowledge it afterwards!”

He shrugs and Lucas sighs.

“Listen, I know you’re scared and if you don’t want to, or if you feel like you can’t deal with a relationship right now, then don’t. But, if it is for anything else... don’t deny yourself a chance to be happy. You deserve it.”

They reach the fast food shop and order hamburgers for all of them. Lucas chats with the cashier (a girl named Anna who Will assumes is

pretty) about their trip, telling her all about the things they did and the ones they're going to do. Anna seems to be pretty into the story, telling Lucas that she also wants to travel through the States with her friends and Will decides to turn out the conversation.

He knows Lucas is right. He knows that he does deserves to be happy, and that so does Mike. But... he doesn't know.

When they start walking back to the motel, Will talks.

"I'm... I'm going to think about what you told me. About Mike and I."

Lucas grins.

"Great."

Then, because Will can't help himself: "You're right. Mike and I and you and Eleven deserve to be happy."

"Exactly, we do deser- Will! I told you I don't like Eleven that way!," Lucas yells and Will starts laughing, running all the way to the motel with Lucas chasing him and yelling after him that he's an asshole.

They wake up early, eat a light breakfast in a Café near the motel, fill the truck's tank and then hit the road before ten. Mike thinks they're becoming really good at this.

"I think we're becoming professionals at this road trip thing," says Eleven, nodding to herself.

"I was thinking the same!," he says.

"If you weren't driving I would totally give you a high five," El says solemnly.

"If I weren't driving I would totally high five you back."

"Oh, my God, just shut up and drive," groans Lucas.

He drives for four hours straight, while in the backseat Dustin, Lucas and Eleven engage in a heated game of “I spy”. In the passenger seat Will hums to the songs in the radio, drawing something on his sketchbook.

“What are you drawing?,” he asks Will when they’re a few miles away from Kansas City.

“Oh, just a silly thing,” Will says, blushing and looking annoyed at himself for doing it. He looks cute.

“Hey, I don’t think *anything* you draw is silly. Tell me? Please?”

It’s hard to make puppy eyes while not taking your eyes away for the road, but Mike manages it. Will chuckles, shaking his head and looking at him with soft eyes. God, Mike wants to kiss him so much.

“It’s just some random characters. A mage; his sister, the High Priest; the Captain of the Royal Guard who falls in love with the High priest; the King of Fairyland who takes the Mage and his sister in the Royal Court; the Royal Counselor... just, some silly stuff.”

Mike laughs, astonished. “Silly stuff? It looks to me as if you thought of a great story.”

Will shrugs, smiling softly.

“Not really. Just a little of the characters backstory. I don’t have a gift imaging stories and writing them down like you.”

He’s pretty sure he just heard Lucas snickering in the backseat, but Mike’s too busy blushing to pay much attention to it.

“I...” he laughs, embarrassed. “Thanks. I really like writing.”

“I know. And you’re great at it,” says Will. “I love your stories. That one you wrote for the school newspaper? The one with the mob boss and the murderess? I loved it. And all your campaigns are really cool. You have a great imagination.”

Mike’s face is hot with embarrassment and he’s sure he’s smiling too much, but Will doesn’t seem to care.

“What about you? You’re *amazing* with a pencil. Seriously, your drawings are awesome. You always were better than any of us at drawing and painting, but the last few years you’ve become a real artist.”

Will is grinning, dimples forming on his cheeks and Mike couldn’t be more enamoured with him. Gosh, this boy is too much for his poor heart.

“Thanks. I really try. I always loved drawing and when... when I came back from the Upside Down the first time it helped me. But, I don’t know, the last couple of years it had a new meaning for me, you know? I love drawing. I draw when I’m happy, when I mad, when I’m scared. I sometimes think that if I could draw for the rest of my life I would be happy.”

“Great, because you’re excellent at it.”

“Gosh, we understand,” says Lucas, exasperated. “You’re both outstanding, exceptional, unprecedented.”

Eleven laughs and Dustin rolls his eyes, shaking his head, as if he were dealing with little kids. The effect loose his force with the wide smile in his face.

Mike rolls his eyes.

“You’re just jealous because you aren’t gifted in the arts like Will and I,” he says, and this time is Will the one who giggles.

“Totally. He’s just mad because he can’t be as great as we are. Don’t worry, Lucas, not everyone can be a sensitive soul like Mike and I.”

“Gee, don’t worry. You can be starving artists all you want. Go and produce a new season of Yogi the Bear all you want, I don’t care,” Lucas says, rolling his eyes.

“Ooooh!,” shouts Dustin, making all of them flinch.

“What?!”

“We should totally go the Yellowstone National Park!,” says Dustin,

clapping in excitement. “Did you know Jellystone Park was inspired by it? It’s an amazing park! Did you know it’s the largest and most famous megafauna location in the Continental United States?”

They all groan, but ultimately Mike can’t help smiling while Dustin engages in a lesson about the “amazing” Yellowstone Park.

He loves these people so much.

They reach Kansas City little past two in the afternoon. They're hungry, as always, and Eleven wonders aloud if they're actually some bottomless kind of new humans.

“I refuse to be a X-Men whose power is to eat and never get full. That's a really sad power,” says Dustin, and Lucas nods.

“I don't say this often, but Dustin is right,” says Lucas, making Eleven giggle and Dustin look offended at him.

“In which one of the two Kansas Cities are we?,” asks Eleven, stopping the bickering before it starts.

“What do you mean? There’s more than one Kansas City?,” asks Lucas, frowning.

“Well, yes,” says Will, passing the map to Lucas, “you have Kansas City, Missouri, where we are right now, and Kansas City, Kansas, that is... well, in Kansas. They’re next to each other, but one is in Missouri and the other in Kansas. They pretty much the same city if you ask me. But then again, I never went to any of the two so maybe now we’re going to find out if they’re the same or not.”

Dustin shakes his head, looking at the map for over Lucas shoulder. “The United States geography will never stop surprising me. Towns named after other towns, two cities named the same next to each other... this is outrageous.”

Eleven snorts and she can see Lucas rolling his eyes at her. “I know, it’s terrible. But I’m sure we’re going to survive this, Dustin,” she says, patting his friend back.

“Well, if the shock over geography has ended,” says Mike, looking at them through the rear-view mirror, “I heard Kansas City is most famous for its steak and barbecue. So shall we search for a steakhouse and finally have lunch?”

“Lead the way, o Captain my Captain,” jokes Dustin and there they go.

They go to a small steakhouse with a big “Best barbecue in Kansas!” in its door. They order a big barbecue for five and they eat as if their lives depended on it. If it weren’t for all the walking they’re doing, Eleven is sure they would come back to Hawkins with a couple of extra pounds on them.

“We should write a book about all the delicious food we ate,” says Dustin, chewing on a steak.

“Ew, close your mouth when you eat!,” shouts Lucas, horrified, and Eleven laughs.

“What would we write in this book?,” asks Will, amused. “None of us know anything about actual food. It would be a book full of ‘this steak was yummy’ and ‘oh boy, wasn’t that peach pie amazing’. I highly doubt we can make a book with that.”

Eleven hums in agreement. “That’s a good point.”

“Well, maybe it could be like a travel book,” suggests Mike, reclining against his chair. “We could talk about not only the food, but the places we visited, the stuff we saw, the memories we made...”

“The mistakes we made, like forgetting to fill the fuel tank...,” says Will, smirking.

“You’re not letting that die, right?,” Mike laughs.

“Never.”

Eleven rolls her eyes, because there’s an amount of flirting she can tolerate in a day and these two already filled that share.

“That actually sounds cool,” says Lucas, ignoring the flirting. “I

mean, maybe not to actually publishing it, but we could totally write about our trip.”

“Well, we already have a writer within our group,” Will says, smiling at Mike, who blushes.

“And an artist who can draw lots of what we saw,” adds Mike, smiling back.

Eleven groans. “Are you two going to be at it all day?”

“W-what?,” asks Mike and Will giggles.

She sees Lucas rolling his eyes. “Forget it, Mike. Let’s just ask for the check and get out of here. We still need to find a hotel and I think Eleven is about to murder you both.”

“Thanks, Lucas. I promised Nancy I would look after Mike, and killing him isn’t a good way of doing my job,” she says, matter of factly.

Mike looks indignantly at her. “Why sister asked you to look after me?!”

Lucas snorts. “Please. Your sister asked us *all* to look after you.”

Mike looks as if all of them had stabbed him in the stomach. Will pats him on his back, and Eleven can see the effort he is doing not to laugh.

“Sorry, Mike. She said you tend to do stupid and impulsive things.”

“Check, please!,” yells Mike, ignoring all of them.

Gosh, why does she loves these idiots so much?

The hotel in which they book in doesn’t have a jacuzzi or a bathtub, but it’s near the limit to the other Kansas City so they doesn’t have to travel much to see things in both cities.

They get two rooms. Lucas and Mike get one, and Dustin, Eleven and Will the other. Contrary to the seatings in the truck, they don't have any sleeping arrangements, discussed or not. They generally decide at the moment who sleeps with who and where. But, now that Dustin actually thinks of it, he realizes that not even one Lucas and Eleven or Will and Mike got to share a bed or a room alone. If he didn't know his friends better, he would have said that was probably premeditated.

Being as it is, his friends are just dorks who don't know how to be at peace with their own feelings.

It's hard being the sensible one.

"Okay, this hotel is not as luxurious as the previous one," says Mike, coming into their room with Lucas on tow, "but at least it has small soaps in the bathroom."

"I wouldn't say our last hotel was 'luxurious', though," says Will, amused. "Just cooler than all the other ones."

"I don't think we have the budget to stay at an actual luxurious hotel," says Lucas, sitting next to Eleven in her bed.

They discuss for a little while what a "luxurious hotel" would actually consist about and then they go out to check the hotel surroundings. It's late, so they can't actually go anywhere specific, but they can go for a little walk.

That's how they find the movie theater.

"Ooooh, guys, look! It's *Beetlejuice*! I wanted to watch this movie, but it wasn't in Hawkins when we left," says Lucas, outside the theater.

"I wanted to see it too!," adds Eleven, "can we watch it?"

"Sure," says Mike, shrugging, "why not? It's not like we have anything better to do. And it's been awhile since we saw a movie in the theater."

They buy five tickets to the next function of *Beetlejuice*. The theater is packed, but they manage to find five adjacent seats.

The movie is bizarre and at moments it reminds Dustin of some of the equally bizarre and terrible things they went through. Through the corner of his eyes he can see Will jumping from time to time, but he looks okay overall. Dustin sees Mike put an arm on Will's shoulders after a particular jumpy moment and that seems to relax Will a little.

The movie is not actually scary, but Dustin guesses they're just sensitive with things like ghost, monsters and demons.

"I liked it," Eleven solemnly says as they walk out of the theater. "It's weird. I like weird."

"Hey, Will," says Lucas, "doesn't Lidia's actress look like your mom?"

Will laughs. "They're nothing alike! For starters, I think my mom is like thirty years older than Lidia's actress. What was her name again?"

"I think she's called Winona Ryder. And I'm with Will, they don't look nothing alike," says Mike.

Dustin rolls his eyes. "Of course you're with Will," he mumbles.

"What?"

"Nothing, nothing."

It's hot in Kansas City, but they manage to have a good time. Or at least they do in Mike's opinion. In the end, at least.

In their first day they decide to go to the Hallmark Cards Tour in the Hallmark Visitors Center, because apparently Dustin has a hidden penchant for cheesy greeting cards.

"Hey, don't judge me. You could end up working here one day, mister Oh Great Writer," jokes Dustin while they walk through corridors and corridors of Hallmark memorabilia.

"Ugh, no, please. Nothing wrong for people to actually work here, but that's not what I want for my future..."

Suddenly none of them seem interested in the display in sight. Mike feels four pair of eyes focused on him and he feels cold, even though the weather hasn't change.

"What...?," Will starts, his eyes huge. He stops, his mouth open but no words coming out of it. None of his friends seem to be able to talk, either. Will clears his throat, before starting again. "What do you want for your future?"

They don't talk about the future.

Sure, they talk about what movie they're going to watch next week, or what classes they have to take next year... their *last* year of school but... They don't talk of what's going to happen to them once school is over for good.

Mike knows why *he* doesn't talk of the future. All his life transpired in a small city, going to school always with the same people, doing exactly the same things. His life hasn't exactly been normal, but there was a constant in it: his friends.

He doesn't know what his life would look like without them. He doesn't *want* to know how his life would look like without them.

And yet, their high school days are coming to an end, their lives ready to change again even if they don't want to.

Before this summer, they didn't even know if Eleven and Will could leave Hawkins, let alone if they wanted to. Lucas has said a couple of times he wanted to be a lawyer, but none of them talked much about it, not even Lucas himself. He doesn't know what Dustin wants to do.

And him? Mike has an ideal job, but that's not the most important part of the future for him. What does he want for his future?

"I want to keep being close to all of you," he says, softly. He hears someone sniffing, probably Lucas, but all Mike can look at is Will's eyes. "I... would want to be a writer but... the thing I want the most... that's being with all of you. To always be friends. Not to live in opposite sides of the country. To... to always be together."

Will smiles warmly at him. "That's good. I want the same."

They finish the tour not long after and go to a nearby park to talk about something they should have talked already.

“I want to be a lawyer, I think I already said that.” says Lucas, playing with a spear of grass.

“I love writing. I want to be a writer. Maybe a screenwriter,” Mike says, his knee touching Will’s.

“What I love is drawing, as you know. I would like to draw as a job. Maybe been a comic artist, or an illustrator,” says Will.

“I want to be a doctor,” says Dustin and all of them gap surprised at him. “What?”

“Dude! You never told us that!”

Dustin shrugs. “We never actually talked about the future. I didn’t want to be the one to brought the topic up.”

“But, a doctor? That’s a lot of work and years of study,” says Eleven.

“I like helping people. And a doctor could come in handy for the lot of us.”

“Well, I don’t have a clue of what I want to do,” admits Eleven. “I want to study something. And I heard Jonathan telling Steve he didn’t need to know right away what he wanted to be when he went to college.”

They stay silent for a while, the sound of the city around them filling the space. Mike was scared of this talk, but now that is happening he’s actually relieved.

His friends don’t want to part from him either.

“So...,” he starts, “we all agree that no matter what we study, we want to still be together?”

In front of him, Dustin lets out a sigh of relief, “yes, please.”

“Definitely.”

“Totally.”

“I actually don't care about a future without any of you in it.”

“Aww,” says Dustin, “we love each other so much. Come here, you tools, group hug!”

They all end up hugging and laughing, rolling in the grass not caring about the heat or the weird looks of the pedestrians.

Yes, they do manage to have a good time. If they're together they can overcome every situation and transform every bad moment into a good one.

... huh, maybe he *does* have a future writing cheesy greeting cards.

“Okay, so the only thing we need for now is a place where Mike can study English or Filmmaking and Will drawing, because you don't need to have a undergrad major in anything specific to go to Law or Medical school,” Dustin informs them their second day in Kansas City, while they're taking the Harley-Davidson factory tour.

“And when finish college?,” asks Lucas.

“Well, if we're lucky there's going to be a Law School and a Medical School in the zone. If not, we'll have to look for a place where there's both things *and* where we can find jobs,” says Dustin.

To Lucas this sounds kind of hard, but he knows his friends are worth it.

“I think we're forgetting a tiny detail. Or we do remember this detail but none wants to bring it up,” says Will, taking pictures of an XA 750. “How do we know Dr. Grantt and Dr. Akerman are going to let us stay away from Hawkins indefinitely? One thing is to go away on vacation and another is to actually move away. Oh, look, Mike, there we can see how they assemble the motorcycles.”

“Maybe if we show them we can control our powers perfectly they'll let us go,” says Eleven later, when they're at the National Airline

History Museum.

When Lucas was little he used to want to be a pilot, so been here is kinda cool. Will takes him a photo with El in front of a Martin 4-0-4 a promises to give it to him when he develops them.

“El’s right,” he Lucas says, “maybe if you show them how great you two did in this trip and promise to go for a check once a year they let you study elsewhere.”

“But what if they don’t?,” insist Will, taking more photos and deliberately not looking at them. “What if they let Eleven go but decide I’m too unstable?”

“They won’t do that,” Mike assures him, trying to squeeze his arm, but Will dodges him.

“But what if they *do*?”

Mike gently puts Will’s camera away, grabbing him by the shoulders and making him look at Mike’s eyes. People start watching them, but if they say something Lucas is going to ask them politely to go to hell.

“Then we stay in Hawkins and all become cops. Or we kidnap you. Or we change their minds. Doesn’t matter what we do, we’re not leaving you behind,” Mike says, softly. “Okay?”

Will smile. It’s small, but it’s a real one. “Okay.”

“Great. Now that we all agree that no man or woman is left behind, can we move to the next plane. Because it’s a Douglas DC-3 and they’re super cool,” says Lucas, tugging Eleven’s hand in the direction of the plane.

7. Chapter 6: Down together

Notes for the Chapter:

Once again, thanks to everyone that left a comment. It means a lot to me <3 And remember, feedback is welcomed!

Their third day in Kansas City is another Museum Day. Not that Eleven has anything against museums, she does like them a lot. But this summer has seen a distinct lack of water in it and she's starting to think that the "swimsuit" in her checklist was unnecessary.

"I promise the next hotel we go will have a pool, please don't hate me," tells her Mike, making puppy eyes at her.

Damn, he's good.

"I take your word. Now let's go. I hope this toy's museum is funnier than the plane's museum yesterday."

"Hey!," protest Lucas, "the plane's museum was awesome!"

As it is, the National Museum of Toys and Miniatures is kinda cute, if not a little creepy. At least some of the dolls are really creepy. And Eleven knows her fair share of creepiness because she can be creepy as hell when she wants.

There's lots of kids in this museum and it's a little weird for them.

"I mean, I know we're not old-old, but damn, don't I feel old seeing so many tiny kids," says Lucas, looking at two twin girls who Eleven is pretty sure don't reach her knees.

"Did we actually were this small once?," asks Dustin, more fascinated with the kids than with the exposition.

"Yep. I have photos to prove it," assures Mike, smirking.

"I don't," says Eleven, looking at two particularly ugly dolls, and next to her Dustin flinches. She hears a gasp and, when she looks up, her

friends are looking at her. Oh. "I...",

"Eleven...?,"

"I... I need to go to the toilet. Excuse me," she says, and anything but runs to the nearest bathroom.

When she enters the bathroom, there's two women inside, laughing and looking at themselves in the mirror. Given how they look, they must be mother and daughter and they just spare a glance at the weird girl who runs into the bathroom.

She hides in one of the stalls, sitting in the toilet and hugging her knees against her body, hiding her face against them.

Why is she in the verge of tears? It was a stupid conversation. They weren't even talking about their actual past. It was just a passing comment, her friends didn't actually start talking about all the things they did when they were little kids.

She sniffs, but refuses to let the tears fall. She's not weak. She's not going to cry. She is strong and it doesn't matter that she didn't get to have an actual childhood, she doesn't care. Why is she even sad about this? Why is she suddenly ruining one of their vacation days? She's not going to cry, she's not...

She hears the door of the bathroom opening and one of the women (probably the older one) gasping in indignation. "Young man, this is the ladies room! You can't be here!"

"I'm sorry!," she hears Will says, and she freezes, "I'm looking for my sister. She wasn't feeling well and I'm worried. Have you saw her? She's tall like me, short brown hair, brown eyes..."

"Young man, I don't believe what you're saying," continues the woman, and Eleven can't take it.

"I'm here, Will," she says, trying not to let her voice break.

There's silence for a few seconds, and then, "let him go with her sister, mom," says the other woman. "Maybe she needs help."

He hears the other woman sigh in exasperation, but soon enough she hears them leave. That's when Will knocks on her stall's door.

"El, can I come in?," asks Will softly.

"... okay."

Will opens the door, a warm smile in his face. Eleven moves a little in the toilet, letting space for Will to sit. It's uncomfortable and they both have half their bodies outside of the toilet and will probably fall if they move too much, but when Will sits next to her and puts an arm around her shoulders, she couldn't care less.

"You wanna talk about it?," Will asks her as she rest her head against his shoulder.

"It's dumb. It doesn't matter."

"If it makes you sad it does matter. But I would be a bit of a hypocrite if I forced you to talk when you don't want to so... If you don't want to talk, we can just sit here until you feel better," Will assures.

She bites her lip, then sighs.

"And I'm a hypocrite if I don't tell you, right."

Will chuckles, patting her head. "No, you're not. I'm serious, if you don't want to talk about it, then we don't."

She doesn't say anything for a while and Will starts to hum a song, though Eleven doesn't recognize it. It's probably one of those unknown bands Will and Jonathan like so much, the ones who sing about rebellion and society being shit.

"It's just... I know we don't talk about... about my time in the Lab. My life... before knowing you. Before being able *to have* a life."

"We... we didn't knew if you wanted to talk about it," says Will. "Do you want to?"

"I don't know," she admits, then sighs again. "Dr. Grantt oftens

pushes me to talk about it. She says it's good for me, that I can't bottle it up, but... I can't... talk about without...," she has to stop, rubbing her eyes and biting her lip. "Gosh, I'm not weak, I don't know why I can't help crying over this."

Will is silent a couple of seconds before talking again. "Do you think I'm weak?"

"What? No, of course not!"

"Because I cry a lot. So if you don't think I'm weak for crying, then you aren't either for doing so."

Eleven huffs, letting the tears roll. "I hate when you apply logic to things," she says, trying to clear the air a little. "It's different when it's about others."

"I know. Believe me, *I know*."

"It's just..." continues Eleven, still not sure if talking about this is good or not, "It does hurt a little," she laughs a humorless laugh, "I mean, of course it hurts. I was a lab rat the first twelve years of my life. I didn't... I didn't get to play with dolls and cars, I don't have photos of my first steps. What I have is developing reports and tapes of tests. And I... I sometimes can't help..."

It's hard talking about this. It's just *thinking* about it and that's why she always push it to the farthest point of her mind. But now that she started talking, she notice than she can't stop, even if it's hard putting it into words.

"I wonder. Sometimes. How my life would have been with Terry. With my mother. And I..." she bites her lips, swallowing up the sobs, "I feel *terrible* because... because I know she tried to find me. I know she did her best until she couldn't stand anymore but... but some part of me... I just... I can't help blame her for everything."

She said it.

She can't look at Will, the only thing she can do is cry. Her mother tried so hard to bring her back, she fought until her forces fade out, until her sanity no longer belonged to her. Terry was a poor woman

trying to have her baby back and Eleven is a monster who blames her for everything that went wrong with her life.

Will doesn't say anything. He just hugs her, tracing soothing circles in her back. He lets Eleven cry, gross sobbings coming out of her mouth.

A couple of minutes later, when Eleven finally calms a little down, Will talks.

"It's okay, Eleven."

"No, it's not!," she screams, tears still rolling through her cheeks. "You don't understand. I just... if she hadn't sign up for those tests, if she hadn't went to Brenner... it's her fault she lost me in the beginning. She was a junkie hippy that wanted an excuse to get high," she says, feeling every poisonous word hurting herself a little. "She fought to save me and the only thing I can think when I see her is that's her fault! That is because of her that she lost me in the beginning! She's my mother and she tried and I blame her! But you won't understand!," she accuses him, hating herself while doing so. "You love your mother and she's great! You would never understand...!"

"I sometimes blame her too," Will says and Eleven is so shocked that the only thing she can do is chock on a sob.

"W-what?"

Will looks to the side, biting his lips. Eleven notices that they both do the same things when they're nervous or sad. They do look like brother and sister... *feel* like brother and sister and that's a weird thought to have at a moment like this.

"I *do* love her, but I know she's a mess. She's... she's better now. Better than she used to be... before."

"But, Joyce... she always worked hard..."

Will laughs, humorless. "Yes, that's why I feel guilty too. She did work hard, but she was also almost never home and let my father say a bunch of horrible things about me in my face. I don't want to make this about me, I just... I just want to let you know that I do

understand what you're feeling. And I get what you're saying, because yes, if she hadn't been part of those experiments this wouldn't have happened. That doesn't mean, of course, that Terry didn't work hard to bring you back. But... but you're *allowed* to be angry at her," Will tells her, hugging her. "The twelve first years of your life were *horrible* and you can be angry about it. It's okay. You're not bad for being angry."

She sniffs, but she isn't crying anymore. She rubs her eyes, drying the last remaining tears.

"I also... also think of your mother as my mother, sometimes," she admits. It sounds dumb next to the other things she just said, but that's also one of her concerns.

Will smiles warmly. "I know. I think she knows, too. That's not bad. And, sure, I don't know Terry, but I don't think she would be angry for you finding a family."

They stay silent for a while, the comfort of the other next to them the only thing they need right now.

She did find a family. And she still loves and cares for her mother and her aunt, even though sometimes her feelings towards her mother are complicated. Eleven knows she is in a better place than before, even if she still isn't perfectly fine. She maybe isn't the best version of herself, but she is a better one than used to be.

She is happy now. With all the things she went through, she is happy.

Eleven hugs Will, her friend, her *brother*, and finally feels able to get up.

"Come on," she says, extending her hand towards Will, "they guys must be freaking out right now."

Will chuckles, "Oh, they sure are. What a bunch of dramatic people."

When they come out of the bathroom, Lucas, Dustin and Mike are waiting for them. She suddenly finds herself in Lucas arms, who hugs her tightly.

“I don’t know what happened, but you can tell us anything, okay?,” he says, his voice muffled against El’s hair. “I love you. We all love you *a lot* and no matter what happens, we’re here for you. We’re your family.”

She feels her eyes watering again and nods, not trusting her voice right now.

“Group hug!,” says Dustin and suddenly El’s boys are all hugging her.

She laughs. Yes, she is happy now.

They leave Kansas City the next day. There’s more things they could do and see, but this far everyday has been pretty emotional and Dustin doesn’t think they can take another day in a row of emotional breakdowns.

“Goodbye, Kansas City,” he says, looking through the truck’s window over El’s shoulder. “You were nice, but you wake something sentimental in all of us that makes us cry.”

It’s almost nine hours to Denver, their next stop, but they’re going to try and reach the city in one day. Although they still have two weeks until the Comic Con, they had a lot of missed days and they want to compensate for them.

“Wait!,” Lucas says, flinching, “did we fill the fuel tank?”

Eleven giggles, “yes, we did. Will and I went to the gas station while you showered.”

Lucas sighs in relief and Dustin rolls his eyes.

The plan is that Mike’s going to drive for three hours, then Eleven the next three hours, and Lucas the rest of the drive. They have to fill the tank at least two times, but they’ve been informed that there’s lots of gas stations in the route they’re taking, so they’re not worried. Not too much, at least.

“By the way,” says Mike, “I know we haven’t talked much about it,

but I was thinking of San Francisco.”

“Uh, okay? It’s a nice city to think about, I guess,” says Lucas.

Through the rear-view mirror, Dustin can see Mike roll his eyes.

“To study in. I was thinking of San Francisco to study and live after school. They have a couple of art colleges, normal colleges and Berkeley and Oakland are less than an hour away.”

“Oh, sure. It sounds as good as the next option, I suppose,” says Dustin, “any reason in particular to choose San Francisco?”

Mike shrugs, “I heard is a nice city.”

He’s not telling them something and they all can see it. Dustin is a little annoyed, because they agreed not to hide things anymore, but he supposes Mike has a good reason and that he’s going to tell them about it soon.

He hopes so, at least.

They buy some sandwiches for lunch in the first gas station they pass and they eat them while driving. It’s El’s turn to drive, so Mike is relaxing in the backseat, eating his sandwich with Will resting against his side.

Will and him are generally touchy feely with each other. They all are, actually, but Will and him in particular. But, this last few days, Will has been particularly... *tactile* with Mike.

Not that he has a problem with it, but it does make him feel a little flustered when the other boy practically sits on his lap when they’re sitting on a park bench or watching a movie in one of the hotels’ rooms. Will has been acting like that since they spend the night at Paris and Mike wonders if something happened without him knowing.

He wonders what this means. He’s not stupid, he knows what this looks like, but a small part of him wonders if maybe he’s just seeing

things. Maybe now that Will has opened up more with them he feels more prone to touching his friends.

Sure, he hasn't been as touchy feely with the others as with Mike, but...

"Are you okay?," Will asks him, his head resting on Mike's shoulder. He looks stunning, but then again, Mike always finds him stunning. "You look like something is bothering you."

"Yeah. It's... it's nothing important."

"It has to do with San Francisco?"

Mike rolls his eyes and he can see Will smirking, "Gosh, it was just a suggestion, I didn't think you all will put so much attention into it."

It wasn't just a suggestion, if he has to be honest. Long before talking with his friends about the future, he has been thinking of it. No, no just "thinking about the future".

What he said to Dustin is true: he does sometimes think that there's something that could happen between Mike and Will, that they could have something great together. But he also knows where he lives, he knows how people already talk about the both of them without them actually being together. He knows that, even if Will does like him back... does *love him* back, they can't be open about it in Hawkins. Not without something bad happening.

Sure, their closest circle wouldn't mind. Lucas, Dustin, Eleven. Jonathan, Steve, his own sisters. Joyce, Hopper. The people who matter the most wouldn't care and he's almost sure they would be happy with them finding happiness in each other.

... well, his parents do matter, even if Mike wishes that they didn't anymore. He can't help wanting their approval and for them to show Mike that they care. But he doubts his parents would be happy about it.

Neither would the rest of Hawkins. Maybe Mrs. Maraoki wouldn't care, or even their old teachers and professors, anyone in town who isn't a complete asshole. But Hawkins is not made of a bunch of

Joyce Byers' and Mrs. Maraokis.

It's not just Will's father who uses the words "queer" and "faggot" like an everyday insult. He knows that Hawkins doesn't have a bright future for them *even* if he and Will are not together.

So he started searching, even if just to have a dream to hang onto. It was hard because he's just seventeen and he lives in a small town, but talking over the phone with Nancy and recruiting her to give him a hand was useful enough.

So, yes, San Francisco isn't just a suggestion, but something that he has been thinking about for some time. He knows he should tell his friends *why* San Francisco is important to him, but telling them that would be admitting some things that he isn't sure he wants to admit just yet.

"Hey, look!," says Lucas, from the passenger seat, pointing at something ahead of them, "it looks like a fair, doesn't it?"

Eleven slows down and as they pass in front of it turns out that yes, it's indeed a fair. But not any fair, no.

"Oh, my God! It's a medieval fair! Can we go? Can we go?," asks excitedly Dustin, fidgeting in his seat.

"Yes! Please!," says Lucas, as excited as Dustin.

Mike hears and feels Will giggling beside him, "Gosh, we're such a bunch of nerds."

"Well, there it goes our plan of driving all day," says Mike, smiling.

"To the medieval fair!," shouts Eleven.

"To the medieval fair!"

Given that their Dungeons & Dragons costumes are pretty medieval, they put them on and go to the fair.

Lucas has gone to fairs before, but never to a medieval themed one. There's lots of people with customs as good if not better than theirs, all of them walking as if they were in the arthurian era. There's stands where they sell ancient looking jewelry, others where they sell robes and dresses, all kind of memorabilia. There's swords, shields, spears, daggers and more.

"This is so cool!," says Dustin, almost jumping of excitement. "Way better than the lame fair that comes to Hawkins once a year."

"I like that fair," says Will, almost defensively.

"That's because you haven't gone to any other one."

"You haven't either!"

"Yeah, and I still know that one sucks."

Lucas rolls his eyes. Will is pouting at Dustin, while Mike looks at Will like he's the most adorable thing he has seen his whole life. Gosh, his friends are too obvious when they have a crush on someone.

There's a class of medieval fencing going on and Eleven, Mike and him go to take it. Will and Dustin decide to stay out of it watching, Will with the excuse that he wants to take photos of it and Dustin just saying that he is afraid of hurting himself. Or others.

Obviously Lucas is amazing at it, but having been using swords and knives of all kinds the last few years it isn't a surprise at all. Mike and Eleven take longer to understand the core of sword playing, but by the end of the class they grasp the basics.

"That's was cool," says Eleven, when they finish. Her cheeks are flushing for the effort and the sun, but she looks pretty, "*and* useful."

"Yeah, it's going to be useful if we need to cut a monster's head again."

Later they go to see an actual medieval battle. The contenders are wearing armors, his chests adorned with the colors of some fictional Royal House, axes, shields and halberds in hands. It's five against five

and it's *brutal*, every participant hitting their opponent with all their forces.

After that they decide to do something not that violent, so they hear a performance by musicians using classical instruments, like a hurdy-gurdy, bagpipes and shawms. It's a little weird, but by the end of it Lucas decides that he likes it and they even buy them a cassette to listen to in the truck.

Dustin and Mike want to try some of the food in the fair, but Lucas is pretty sure those things are not sanitary approved, so they divide in two groups: Dustin, Mike and Will on team *lets eat something that will probably kills us* and Eleven and Lucas on team *we want to live*.

There's some common fair games, but customized to look kinda medieval. They're obviously rigged, but the fair's people doesn't know that team *we want to live* has a telekinetic with them. Eleven wins a bunch of plushies and diverse prizes and yes, that's kind of cheating, but they give almost everything to some kids that lost all their money trying to win something, so that's good.

The only thing Eleven keeps is a necklace with a sun and a moon.

"It's for Joyce," she says, "I want to give something to her when we get back and I think this is pretty."

"I'm sure she's going to love it. I mean, even if it wasn't pretty she would like it because you give it to her."

El rolls her eyes. "I don't just want Joyce to like it because is some random thing I give to her. I want her to like it because is something nice."

"Well, it is nice."

"Thanks, I have great taste," Eleven says, intertwining her arm with Lucas's. "Where shall we go now, oh, brave knight?"

Lucas giggles, "Oh, my fair lady, maybe we should..." he stops then, something catching his eye. A huge grin breaking through his face.

"Lucas?"

“I know where we should go, El,” he says, and then points to the sign a couple feet ahead of them.

Eleven follows his fingers and then gasps, followed by a tiny jump that Lucas can't help but find adorable. As a friend. Adorable as a friend. Because he doesn't like Eleven in that way.

“A petting zoo!,” Eleven says, excited.

Lucas laughs as Eleven drags him to the petting zoo, where she tries to pet and hug every single animal. He wishes he had a camera, because Eleven looks too happy there.

He wishes they could stay here, in this moment, forever. The five of them in their Dungeons & Dragons costumes. Eating and laughing. Having a good time. Happy. Together.

“Come, Lucas! Pet this sheep! It's so fluffy!”

He giggles again, going to El's side and letting her took his hand to pet the sheep together.

When they finally leave the fair the sky is already darkening, so they decide to stay in the town where the fair was held, a small place in the middle of Kansas called Russell. The town's two motels are packed, but the Millers, the old couple that was managing the petting zoo, tells them that they can crash in their kids old bedroom, so they take the offer.

They tell the Millers that they can pay for the bedrooms, but they refuse.

“We have to honor the southern hospitality, right?,” says Mrs. Miller, and they finally give in.

The bedroom has two sets of bunk beds and a bed-couch, so they all manage to get a nice place to sleep. This time they don't need to fight for half an hour to decide who sleeps where. Lucas and Will like sleeping in the top bunks and Dustin and Eleven prefer the lowers, while Mike offers himself to sleep in the bed-couch.

They brush their teeth and put their pajamas on and Mike is the first one in bed because he is exhausted. Maybe tomorrow he will ask Lucas and Eleven to drive the whole trip, because he doesn't think he can do it for five hours straight, which is more or less what they have to Denver.

He hears his friends get into their beds, but he can't bother to open his eyes.

"Okay, we're already settled," he hears Dustin say, "you can turn out the lights, Mike."

He does open his eyes then, "What? No way, I'm already in bed. You were the last ones in bed, one of you should turn off the lights."

"Well, Will and I already are up here," says Lucas, "and it would be dangerous if we tried to climb up in the darkness."

"Well, then El or Dustin should do it!"

"Come on, Mike," says Eleven, "you're the one who's closer to the switch."

"But I don't want to!"

It's a dumb thing. Yes, he is the closer one to the switch and the whole thing would take him less than ten seconds... but he doesn't want to! And he was the first one to bed!

"Oh, my God," he hears Will say, "you all are a bunch of kids. I'll do it."

Mike is about to tell him that, like Lucas said, it's dangerous for him to try to climb to the top bunk in darkness, but suddenly the lights go out without anyone moving.

He hears Dustin gasp, but after that everyone is silent.

"There," says Will after a couple seconds, his voice slightly shaking, "I turned it out."

Mike feels himself smiling, "Will?"

"I don't wanna talk about it," says Will, "I turned it out. I'm tired. Everybody go to sleep."

Mike still feels tired, but he wants to climb to Will's bed and hug him tight. This is the first time since they stopped the Demogorgon from turning Will that the boy uses his powers from his own will.

Everyone does as Will tells them, though. Usually they talk a lot before actually going to sleep, but they respect Will and not one of them says a word.

... until almost fifteen minutes later, when Mike can't help it anymore.

"Will?"

He hears his friend sigh.

"I told you to go to sleep, Mike."

"I know. I'm going to do that. I just wanted to tell you I'm proud of you."

The room goes silent again for a couple of seconds, then, "Thanks. We will talk tomorrow. Now sleep."

Mike does.

Will wakes up in the morning after a nightmare. He is panting, the images of the Demogorgon clear in his mind, but he knows exactly where he is and doesn't feel the need to run, to hide.

"Will?," he hears Mike's groggy voice, "Are you okay?"

Will looks at him from his high spot in the top bunker. Mike looks barely awake, his hair going in every direction. From below his bunk, Will can hear Eleven soft snoring, and in front of him he watches Lucas sleep hiding his head under the pillow. Dustin, below Lucas, mumbles something in his sleep, but Will can't hear what it is.

“Will?”

He smiles, softly, “I’m okay. It was just a nightmare, but everything is fine,” he says and for the first time in a long time, it’s not a lie.

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. I not sleepy anymore, though. Do you wanna sleep a bit more or do you want to go and see if the Millers are awake? Maybe we can help them with breakfast.”

“Nah, I’m not sleepy either,” Mike yawns and Will giggles.

Mr. and Mrs. Miller are in fact awake, and Mike and Will help them make breakfast. Will goes with Mr. Miller to collect eggs from the hen house and Mike with Mrs. Miller to milk the cows.

Will remembers going to a farm in second grade, but frankly this is ten times better. Or at least more real. When Will comes inside the kitchen again carrying the eggs, Mike is already inside and looking kind of disgusted of having milked a cow. Will can’t help giggle and his friend ruffles his hair, trying to bother him but just managing to look more cute.

“How long have you two been married?,” asks Will, helping Mrs. Miller make scrambled eggs.

“Oh, well, we’ve been married for just forty years,” Mrs. Miller says, smiling at his husband.

Mike laughs, “*Just* forty years? Mrs. Miller, that’s a lots of years to say ‘just’, don’t you think?”

“I guess you’re right, Michael,” chuckles Mrs. Miller, “but you have to understand, we have been together for sixty years, so forty does sounds like a lot less.”

Mike whistles, astonished, and Will agrees. Sixty sound like *a lot* of years.

“Why did you wait twenty years to get married?,” he asks, out of curiosity. His parents married less than a year after meeting, so it

does sound strange to him.

Then again, his parents divorced less than ten years after getting married and currently hate each other, so maybe they're not a good example.

"Well," begins Mr. Miller, frowning at the stove where he is frying bacon, "we are from Nebraska and when we were young interracial marriage was still illegal. And, as you can clearly see, I'm black and Suzanne is white. So, no marriage for us back at home."

Will is left perplexed for a moment. He has forgotten that, not long ago, people of different races couldn't get married. Could even go to jail just for being together in some places.

"My mother, God rest her soul, was very ill," continues Mr. Miller, "so I couldn't leave her side. Suzanne's parents threw her out of their home when they found out we were together..."

"Those heartless bastards," mumbles Mrs. Miller and is weird hearing an eighty something petite lady swear.

"Suzanne, there's kids here."

"Sorry, sweetheart. But they *were* heartless bastards."

Mr. Miller chuckles, shaking his head and looking lovingly at his wife.

"As I was saying, Suzanne parents throw her out, so we did live together for almost fifteen years before my dear mother passed away in 1948. So, that same year we take all our belongings and moved here to Russell, because Kansas didn't have anti-miscegenation laws."

"We also got married that year," says Mrs. Miller, smiling at her husband. She chuckles, then, before adding, "I think that we first got married and *then* started looking for a house."

"You must have been really glad to finally be able to get married," says Mike.

"Well, it wasn't that important to us, to be honest," admits Mrs.

Miller. "We were already living together and deeply in love, those papers didn't change much. But we were worried of having kids while not being married, because they could have problems, so we got married most than anything for that. A year later we had our first daughter, Ella."

"We went through a huge Ella Fitzgerald era," admits Mr. Miller, chuckling. "But our Ella didn't become a singer, though. She's a doctor in San Francisco where she lives with her husband and their kids. They come visit us at least two times a year, though."

Will sees Mike perk up at that.

"She lives in San Francisco? Where?"

"In the Mission District, why? Do you know San Francisco?"

"No, but we want to go there. To study, I mean. Mission District is next to Castro, right?"

To Will this all sounds like ancient Greek, but there's a light of recognition in the Millers' eyes.

"Yes, indeed. Ella has lots of good friends that live in Castro, doesn't she, Perry?"

"Yes, darling. Good people, all of them," says Mr. Miller. "Do you want to live in Castro, Michael?"

Mike blushes and Will is completely lost.

"I... I heard it's a good neighborhood."

"Well, I hope you find what you're looking for there," says Mrs. Miller, going to Mr. Miller side, who puts an arm around her waist, "We better than anyone can tell you that sometimes moving to other places can improve your life."

Mike smiles and nods and, seriously, Will is one hundred percent lost right now.

"What's Castro?"

“It’s a district in San Francisco. I... I’ll tell you later,” says Mike, not looking at him and still blushing.

Mrs. Miller chuckles, “Well, we talked a lot. Why don’t you go wake up your friends? You have a long day ahead of you, so you all better have a good breakfast before going.”

“Yes, of course. Come one, Will, let’s wake up everybody,” Mike says, before rushing to the bedroom.

Will follows him, deeply confused and wondering once more what’s with San Francisco and Mike.

They leave the Millers’ farm not long after finishing breakfast, promising to write and to go visit them if they pass for Kansas again. Lucas likes them. They’re a weird yet oddly charming old couple.

Today Mike said he didn’t feel like driving, so Eleven offered to drive until they reached Denver. Lucas is sitting in the passenger seat again and he can hear Will and Mike snoring from the backseat. Will is resting his head on Mike’s shoulder, who has an arm draped around Will’s shoulders. They’re disgustingly adorable and he steals Mike’s camera to take a photo of them.

“That one goes to the scrapbook,” says Dustin, and he, Lucas and Eleven laugh.

They let the two lovebirds sleep and start a game of 21 Questions. Dustin guesses that Lucas was thinking of Cyndi Lauper and that Eleven was thinking of Tom Cruise. Then Eleven guesses that Dustin was thinking of Rick Astley (which was so obvious Lucas can’t believe he didn’t notice it) and Lucas that Eleven was thinking of Donna Summers. After that he loses track of who has the most findings under their belts.

A little after midday they reach a dinner with a gas station on the side, so they wake Mike and Will, fill the tank and have a light lunch before hitting the road again.

Mike and Will tell them the story of the Millers and Lucas feels a

little sick. He knows that he is far for living in a country where the color of your skin doesn't matter to anyone, but being reminded that no long ago things were worse is frightening.

He wonders how his life would have been if he would have been born thirty, forty years ago. He doesn't know if he could have been as close to his friends as he is now. He's not sure how laws were in Indiana at the time, but he is glad to have been born at almost the end of the twenty century.

"Are you okay?," Eleven asks him, worried.

"Yeah. It's just... even though they're happy together, it's kind of a sad story, you know?," he says.

In the backseat, Will and Dustin are discussing who shot first, if Han or Greedo, while Mike acts as referee, but Lucas doesn't pay attention to them. The only thing he can look at right now is Eleven, her short hair framing her face in a lovely way, her soft smile, her bright eyes... something in his heart clenches thinking of the Millers' story and he doesn't want to think about it right now.

"Yes, it is. But you said it: they're happy together. They got married, they had kids, now they have a beautiful farm and, most importantly, a petting zoo."

Lucas laughs and Eleven smiles brightly at him, dimples forming on her cheeks, the sun like a halo behind her. She's the most beautiful girl he has ever seen.

He chokes on his laughter and Will has to pat him hard on the back so he doesn't actually choke to death.

"Dude, what happened? Are you okay?," asks Dustin.

"Y-yeah. Laughed too hard, just that."

"It's my fault," says Eleven, smirking, "I'm too funny for this world."

They laugh and Lucas knows he's screwed.

It's raining when they arrive at Denver and Dustin forgot to put "umbrella" in all their checklist, so of course none of them bought one. He has failed his friends.

"The Ultimate Checklist is flawed. I'm a farce," he says, leaning against the window.

They're staying at a hotel a few blocks away from the City Park. They first asked how much costed a suite in the Brown Palace Hotel, but the price almost made them cry so they went to look for other places.

It's a nice hotel. And it has a pool, so if it stops raining they can go for a swim. Their suite is similar to the one in St. Louis: two bedroom and a living room, but this has a mini kitchen too, so they can buy ingredients and cook here.

They spent the rest of the day in the room, because it rains too much to go outside. They eat from the room service and watch movies until they all fall asleep.

The next day is cloudy, but luckily it doesn't rain anymore. They wake late and miss breakfast, so they eat brunch at a café next to the hotel.

"Whoever invented brunch was a genius," he says, eating his waffles.

"This is one of those times when we have to agree," says Lucas, chewing his sausages.

After eating they go to Denver's Downtown Aquarium, because they apparently love aquatic life now and just one aquarium in the trip isn't enough.

Mike and Will take photos, while Eleven tries to catch the fishes attention. Lucas looks nervous, though, fidgeting in his place and flinching anytime Eleven comes near him. Dustin tries not to sigh: even though he is the only one not emotionally compromised, he's also the only one with enough brains and sensibility to understand what's going on.

"Are you okay?," he asks Lucas, when Mike, Eleven and Will go to the bathroom.

"Yeah, sure. Of course. I'm perfectly fine," Lucas says, and Dustin looks at him, unabashed. Lucas sighs, "I just... I realized something. Yesterday. And I can't stop thinking about it. But I'm fine."

This time Dustin does sigh.

"Is that realization that you are madly deeply in love with El?"

Lucas chokes on air.

"W-what?! What are you talking about?," Lucas says, laughing nervously.

"Lucas, man. We can do this now or you can become Mike and dance around the issue for a year. Your choice, really."

Lucas sighs, a small smile forming in his face.

"I don't want to be Mike."

"Awesome, because there's a limited amount of denial I can take."

"I... I do like Eleven," Lucas says, shyly looking at the floor. "I mean, I like her in *that* way."

He looks adorable right now and Dustin wants to hug him. So he does, of course, because he isn't emotionally constipated like all his friends, apparently.

"Aww, that's so cute!"

"Dude, stop it!," says Lucas, trying to sound annoyed but failing due to his laugh.

"I think you and El would make a cute couple. You should ask her out."

"Dustin, I just realized I like her, can you give me a break?"

Dustin snorts, crossing his arms. "Okay, but I'm going to remind you promised that you don't want to become Mike."

"Doesn't want to become me for what?," asks Mike, walking towards

them with Eleven and Will on tow.

Dustin sees Lucas pale, and because he's a great friend goes for a distraction.

"He doesn't want to become like you in his driving. Man, you drive too fast. That's not safe."

Mike gapes at him and Will and Eleven start giggling.

"I've been driving the entire trip! You could show a little more gratitude!"

They start bickering, then, and Lucas looks relieved. Gosh, Dustin is such a good friend.

When they get out of the aquarium, the day is sunny, so they come back to the hotel to put their swimsuits on and go to the pool.

Eleven bikini used to be Nancy's, so it's an exquisite one, like all the clothes Nancy has passed to her. It's a pale pink, with tiny white flowers and it hides enough so Eleven feels comfortable, but not too much as to look old fashioned.

Eleven cherish every piece of clothing Nancy gave her. Firstly because she looks up to Nancy like an older sister, and second because she wishes to be able to give those clothes back to Holly when the little girl grows. Mike says that she doesn't need to, mostly because by that time fashion is probably going to be different and Holly may not like it, but Eleven doesn't care.

The hotel's pool isn't colossal, but it's big enough so they all can swim without colliding with the other residents. Given that Eleven never learned to swim, her friends take turns to stay with her in the shallow end of the pool.

"If you want to, I can't try to teach you again," offers Lucas in his turn. "I promise I'm not going to let you go until you feel comfortable."

Eleven chews on her lip, looking askance at the water. It's scary, but this trip is supposed to be a new beginning for them, right?

Besides, she trusts Lucas.

"Okay," she sighs, and Lucas smiles at her, dimples forming in his cheeks.

Eleven smiles back and he stands in front of her, his back at the deep end of the pool. Lucas extends his hands at her and, with a deep breath, Eleven takes them.

Lucas starts to walk backwards, "Remember, I'm holding you. And I'm not letting you go. And Mike, Dustin and Will are close, so if something is wrong they can come and help us."

Eleven nods, incapable of talking. The water almost reaches her neck and she comes closer to Lucas, until their chests are almost touching. If she weren't so scared right now, maybe she would be blushing, but she can't bother with things as feelings in a moment like this.

The water reaches her lips and Eleven whines against her own wishes.

"It's okay," Lucas says, reassuring, "We're stopping here for now. Let's start with floating. A good way of floating is moving you body. Do you want to try?"

She nods and Lucas starts moving his legs and arms, without releasing her hands. He starts floating, of course, so Eleven imitates him. She too starts floating and she smiles.

"I'm floating!," she says and Lucas laughs.

"Yes you are!," Lucas congratulates her, "do you want me to let you go?"

"No!," she yells, and in reflex response throws herself at Lucas, who yelps and wavers, but catches her in his arms and quickly puts his feet in the floor again.

Thanks God he's taller than her.

“O-okay. Not letting you go, got it.”

“Sorry,” she says. She realizes then that she’s wrapped around Lucas body like a koala and now she does blush.

“I-it’s okay. Let’s try again, shall we?”

“Yes, of course.”

This might not have been their best idea but by the end of the day she’s able to float towards the deep part of the pool. Sure, she doesn’t let his hand go, but at least she’s at the deep end, right?

The next morning they go to the Denver Botanic Gardens, because Dustin is a big nature nerd and they’re all good friends. Mike’s not a big fan of plants and flowers, but he admits it’s a pretty place.

“Did you know this place has the country’s biggest collection of plants from cold temperate climates around the world?”

“We obviously didn’t, Dustin,” says Will, smirking, “but now we do and that’s amazing. Thanks.”

“Are you being sarcastic? When you are sarcastic is hard to know. You look too angelic to do it.”

Will giggles, “No, I wasn’t being sarcastic. And I’m not angelic!”

“Yes, you are,” say Lucas and Eleven, making Will roll his eyes.

After having lunch they go to Denver’s Art Museum, where Will looks fascinated at all the paintings and Mike looks fascinated at Will. He can’t help it, Will looks just too cute when he’s awed by art.

Once they leave the Art Museum, they go to the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, because culture rocks. No pun intended.

That’s the place for all of them, because they’re all nerds for science. There’s dinosaurs, mummies, an exhibit about the human body, another about the universe and just too many cool things. Mike and

Will take lots of photos to show Mr. Clarke when they come back to Hawkins. Their old science professor would just love all of this.

When the night falls, they go to the supermarket near the hotel and buy some cheap things to make an even cheaper dinner. But the most memorable thing is: they manage to buy alcohol.

They sit in the suite's living room after eating, making a circle around the bottle of vodka. They look awed at the bottle as if it were something sacred and they must look ridiculous, but he doesn't care.

"I can't believe we're getting drunk," says Lucas, his eyes big.

"We're breaking the law," mutters Eleven.

Dustin opens the bottle and takes a sip straight from the bottle. Then he coughs like crazy.

"Oh, my God! It's too strong."

They all start drinking from the bottle, taking a sip and then passing the bottle to the person to their right. By the fifth or sixth sip, Mike starts giggling, being followed quickly by Lucas and then by Will. Eleven resists until her tenth sip, but after that she is completely flushed and laughing too.

It takes Dustin fifteen sips to start getting drunk and they all look at him with admiration.

"You're our hero!," slurs Lucas, "All hail the mighty Dustin!"

"Hell, yeah!," screams Dustin and then starts laughing so much he falls off the couch.

They put MTV on and start dancing and jumping to whatever song comes on. At some point Mike grabs Will's hands and starts dancing really close to him. Will clings to him, giggling, and Mike thinks he's beautiful.

"You're beautiful," he blurts and Will giggles again.

"Thanks. You're beautiful too," Will says, and then gives Mike a kiss

on the cheek and now is Mike who becomes a giggling mess.

They trip and end up falling to the couch, one on top of the other, laughing until they fall asleep.

When Mike wakes up his head hurts like crazy and Will is cuddled against his side. For a blissful moment he doesn't remember anything, but then all memories come back on and he groans remembering how he told Will he was beautiful.

He's an idiot.

"Shhh," Will shushes him, snuggling more against him, "I'm trying to sleep and you're being too loud."

Mike freezes, but after a couple of seconds he decides that he is too hungover to care and cuddles Will back.

They stay the whole day in the hotel, trying to recover from the hangover. Apparently, they're all lightweights.

"I'm never drinking again," Eleven swears at one point, but nobody believes her.

They decide that Denver already fulfilled its mission on their trip and the next day they pack everything and leave first hour in the morning. This time they're going to the Yellowstone Park and it's almost ten hours of driving, but they're rested and this time no fair is going to distract them.

"To Yogi Bear's house!," Dustin yells once they're in the truck and they all laugh.

"To Yogi Bear's house!"

8. Chapter 7: New Directions

Notes for the Chapter:

Can you notice how I running out of things to name the chapters?

Thanks to everyone who left a comment. They meant a lo to me and push to write more. Thanks to everyone for encouraging me <3

As it turns out, they can't actually drive for ten hours straight.

By hour seven they're all nodding off and Dustin is sure they're going to crash into a tree.

"Pull over! Pull over!," he shouts to Lucas, who's driving and who also just had his eyes closed for more than ten seconds.

Lucas pulls over and they stay silent for awhile. There's still daylight, but twilight is just an hour and little more away and they definitely can't reach Yellowstone like this.

"Let me check in the map if there's a town nearby," says Will, yawning.

There's no town nearby, obviously. Dustin sighs, tired.

"None of you can keep driving. There's a creek here, so we can fill our water bottles and we still have sandwiches we can eat for dinner. Let's take out our sleeping bags and stay the night here."

Mike looks horrified at him, "We can't stay the night here!"

"We're going to Yellowstone Park to camp, right? Well, this will be just like that. Take it as practice camping."

Mike is about to retort to that, but it's cut off by a huge yawn that leaves him blushing.

"Dustin is right," says Will, thankfully, "you can't keep driving. It's

not ideal, but it's not bad either."

Mike sighs, but he can't say no to Will, so he agrees. Lucas and Eleven are too sleepy to protest, so they decide to stay here the night. After eating their sandwiches, they get inside their sleeping bags, one next to the other, and enjoy the night view.

"This is beautiful," says Lucas with awe.

It is indeed. The stars are bright and countless, lots of constellations that they can't see at home. Hawkins may not be big, but the night lights in the street make it difficult to watch the stars. Here, though, with no houses in miles, the stars can shine to all their capability.

"Okay, this was actually a great idea," says Mike.

"I know. All my ideas are great," says Dustin, yawning.

"Yes, they are," says Lucas.

"Aww, you do love me."

They fall asleep like that: all close to each other and with the stars looking after them.

They wake up a little after ten. Mike feels well rested and ready to drive. Sure, the floor and his sleeping bag are not a bed, but it's true they're going camping to Yellowstone, so it's not like he wasn't prepared for that.

They fill their water bottles and eat some granola bars Dustin had in his bag. It's not the best breakfast in the world, but worse is nothing.

"How far away of Yellowstone are we?," asks Mike, once they're in the truck again.

"If I'm not wrong," says Will frowning and holding the map open up in front of him, "it should be around three hours. Think you can make it in one go?"

“Let’s find out. To Yellowstone Park Part Two!”

“To Yellowstone Park Part Two!,” cheer his friends and through the corner of his eye Mike can see Will smiling.

They haven’t talk about the whole “you’re beautiful” incident. To be honest, Mike doesn’t know if he’s ready to talk about it. Because if he does talk about it, he’s going to blurt out all the feelings he has been piling up inside of him for the last... two years? Even more? He frankly doesn’t now for how long he has been harbouring this feelings towards Will.

He just knows that one day he was watching some dumb show in the tv and suddenly the realization he was in love with Will hit him like a military tank. And he has been hit by a military tank before, so he knows exactly what he’s talking about.

It wasn’t even a romantic show, or a show that made him think of Will. It was a random quiz show and Mike can’t remember for the life of him what question they have asked when he had his epiphany.

He freaked out for a week and a half, but after that he learned to live with the fact that he was in love with one of his best friends. Again.

“Are you okay?,” Will asks him, “Are you sure you want to drive? I don’t think El or Lucas would have a problem with driving until Yellowstone if you’re feeling under the water.”

“I’m okay. Just... things in my mind.”

“It’s about San Francisco?”

Mike rolls his eyes. He’s regretting telling them about San Francisco so much. They just can’t let it go. Sure, maybe if he told them *why* they would stop, at least a little bit, but that would mean explaining other things and...

Yeah, again, he doesn’t know if he’s ready to talk about it.

“No, it’s not about San Francisco.”

“Then about what?”

“You.”

Will seems surprised at that and, to be honest, so does Mike.

“About what a pain you are when you’re curious,” he adds and Will rolls his eyes and shakes his head.

That was a nice save. He wonders if he’s going to be brave enough to tell Will the truth anytime soon instead of distract him with jokes, though.

“This is nothing like the forest back home,” says Dustin.

“Not at all.”

Yellowstone is gigantic. Everything is tall and wide and so green and beautiful Will can’t help feeling taken aback. Back home everything is slim and decayed trees, flowers that never get blossom, not even in springtime.

The first thing they do is look for a place to camp. The last time they phoned home, Mike talked with Steve who had already travelled to Yellowstone. Steve recommended them the camp area in the Mammoth Hot Springs, so there they go.

They have a big tent Hopper lend them. It’s massive, so the five of them fit inside perfectly, along with their suitcases and bags.

The park staff gives them pamphlets with all the information they need: where the gas stations are, where to find shops that sell food and toiletries among other things, the opening and closing times of the hot springs, and more.

After setting up the tent they go to the nearest shop and buy sandwiches and ice cream. They eat sitting in one of the park’s picnic tables. Dustin laments that they didn’t bring any picnic basket to reenact some Yogi Bear scene and he and Lucas start bickering about the true meaning of the Yogi Bear Show.

After lunch they pick up their swimming suits from their tent and go

to one of the hot springs Steve recommended them. There's a lot of people, but they manage to find a spot big enough for the six of them.

"Oh, my glorious God, this is magnificent," says Dustin, reclining his back against the edge of the pool.

Will sighs happily, doing as Dustin did. He also lets his head fall on Mike's shoulder, who is right next to him and squirms a little before sitting still. Will smiles and it isn't just due to the pool, but also because he is slightly enjoying torturing Mike like this.

After thinking about it, he had decided that he does want to know where this thing with Mike can take them to. He isn't brave enough to ask Mike out outright, but he's trying to give his friend as many clues as possible. Of course, when the person you're trying to give clues about your feelings is an oblivious seventeen year old, things are a little hard, but the bright side of this is that he is having the time of his life watching Mike reactions to everything Will does.

He thought Mike was going to finally ask him out after he told Will how he thinks Will is beautiful, but the next morning Mike didn't bring the topic up.

He sighs again. If Mike doesn't tell him anything by the time they're back at Hawkins, Will has decided he's going to ask out Mike instead. It's a scary thought, because even if he's almost sure what Mike response will be, the smallest chance of a rejection makes him sweat, but he's going to do it anyway.

This is worth it. They are worth it.

By the time they come out of the hot springs they're dizzy and sleepy. Being submerged in hot water was *amazing*, but the only thing Lucas wants now is his sleeping bag and at least eight hours of sleep.

They're all hungry, though, so first they lit up a campfire and cook the mac and cheese they brought early in the shop.

"See? If it weren't for the Ultimate Checklist we would have forgotten

to bring a cooking pot,” says Dustin, almost inhaling his mac and cheese.

“We could have brought one. We wouldn’t have died, it’s just a cooking pot,” Lucas says, rolling his eyes.

“Excuse me!,” Dustin says, scandalized, and then they’re bickering again.

Sometimes people think he and Dustin don’t get along, or that they hang out just because they have the same friends. In Lucas opinion, people are stupid.

They might bicker a lot, but Dustin is his best friend and he can’t imagine his life without him. Yes, they bicker, but it’s nice and fun doing so. There’s no poison in their “fights”, no real harm behind what they say. It’s just another game for them, another way of showing how much they know each other because they know exactly which buttons to push and which ones not to.

Also, the only time he actually punched someone was when one of his classmates called Dustin an “annoying fatso”. That should be a clue as to how much he adores his friend.

After eating, Lucas and Mike go to clean the dishes and when they come back they hurry up to the tent. They’re all tired and sleepy and they still have two more weeks before reaching San Diego, and a whole month more before coming back to classes. Lucas feels happy like this, squished between Dustin and Eleven, the crickets singing outside and the summer heat lulling him to sleep.

The following day they wake up early, cook some scrambled eggs in the campfire and then they go hiking to Fairy Falls. They had to drive first, because the Fairy Falls are almost on the other side of the park, but to actually reach them they have to hike something like 5 miles.

They park the truck at the end of Fountain Flat Drive and start walking to the trailhead. From there they walk through a lodgepole pine forest to the falls. Eleven isn’t that interested in lodgepole pines,

but as with every other thing regarding the flora of a place, Dustin has lots of things to say about them.

“Depending on the subspecies, the *Pinus contorta*- that’s the scientific name, by the way- can grow as an evergreen shrub or tree. These, of course, have grown to become trees. They must be of the *latifolia* subspecies. Aren’t they pretty?”

“Gorgeous,” says Eleven, and it’s not a lie.

They reach the Fairy Falls around mid day and ask a young couple to take a photo of all of them in front of the falls. They have just a few photos of the five of them together, because someone is always the one actually taking the photo.

The water of the falls is chilly and beautiful and they bath in the water before carrying on.

They walk a little longer and reach the Spray and the Imperial geysers. Eleven, as all her friends, never saw a geyser, so they all gasp fascinated at the show. She never thought she would find gorgeous a bunch of water erupting to the skies, but life is full of surprises. Will takes a couple of photos, but quits after the second because he says that no photo can capture the beauty of this all.

When they get back to the truck they’re tired of walking, so they drive back to the camp and spend the rest of the day sunbathing. Mike almost baths himself in sunscreen before actually coming into the sun and they all joke at him for that.

“There’s nothing funny about skin safety,” he says, solemnly, which makes them laugh even more.

When the night falls, they go to the shop and buy some vegetables, chicken and sticks.

“I’m going to show you the amazing kebabs I made with my grandparents when we went camping,” Lucas tells them, and he teaches them how to cut the veggies and the chicken and how to put them in the sticks.

They burn out a little, but they’re delicious nevertheless and they

promise to thank Lucas grandparents when they get back to Hawkins for the awesome idea.

In their third day at Yellowstone, Dustin insist on doing a horseback riding tour. He and Mike are the only ones that had actually ridden a horse before, so she, Lucas and Will are not exactly thrilled at the idea. Dustin, because he's a dirty player, does that thing where he pouts and looks at them through his eyelashes and they end up giving in.

They go to the Tower-Roosevelt Area, where they hire the tour. At first they try to get each one a horse, but Will looks about to faint as soon as he's alone in a horse, so he ends up riding with Mike. For a moment Eleven thinks it's all just an act to make Mike flustered (something Will has been doing lately), but when she sees Will's terrified face and how tight he hugs Mike, she ends up believing him.

Luckily, she isn't scared of her horse. Sure, she doesn't have a clue what she's doing, but she's not scared. Her horse is a deep brown (a seal brown, their guide informs them) and it's named Brandy. Eleven feels like a mighty warrior of the old ages riding Brandy, although she probably looks like the stiff teenager she actually is.

Lucas is in a similar position to her, although he is a little more relaxed. Dustin, on the other hand, looks *elated* to be riding a horse.

"Ayo, Silver!," Dustin shouts at one point, making their guide laugh.

"Sorry, he's excited," says Lucas.

"It's okay. At least he's having fun. And I have saw worse," admits the guide.

When the tour is over, their guide ("Please, call me Oliver") invites them to a cookout site for a steak dinner. There's a lot of people, but the food is delicious and they came back to their tent late at night and tired, but happy.

They stay four days more at Yellowstone. They go hiking in the morning, come back to their camp to have a quick lunch, and then spend the afternoon by the lake either swimming or having a

sunbath.

They see lots of wild animals, like bears, elks, moose, at least two kinds of deer, mountain goats, pronghorns, cougars and more. They do have deers in Hawkins, but they find more pretty the ones at Yellowstone. Maybe it's just the context.

Will and Mike take photos of everything and they manage to get a couple more photos of the five of them together. Dustin suggest actually making a scrapbook of their trip and although at first they laugh at the idea, they do think it would be cool.

On their last night at Yellowstone, they roast marshmallows and sing around the campfire. They don't have music, but such little things have never stopped them before. They sing about love, and friendship, and never giving up. They sing the latests pop hits, old country songs, classic jazz tunes. They sing and laugh and watch the stars, making up stories about ancient princes and goddess.

They fall asleep all tangled up together outside their tent and when they wake up they're sore for sleeping in such an awful position, but few times have they felt this alive.

Eleven watch her boys' smiling faces and she hasn't even feel more in love with them as now. Her brothers, her friends, her family. With the sun bathing their sleepy faces, she knows that it doesn't matter what role they occupy or will occupy in her life: she loves the four of them and she never wants to be apart of them.

"Is this real life? Or is this just fantasy?," gasps Dustin, clutching his chest.

"Caught in a landslide, no escape from reality," adds Will, smirking.

"Open your eyes, look up to the skies and see....," hums Mike, drumming his fingers against the wheel of the truck, and that's all Lucas can take in one go.

"I get it, you're all surprised we got to Salt Lake City in one go without getting distracted in the road, can we stop now?"

"I'm just a poor boy, I need no sympathy," sings Eleven.

"You're actually a girl."

"And you're a buzzkill," says Eleven, sticking his tongue out at him.

They reach Salt Lake City in the late afternoon and yes, it is surprising they managed to get here from Yellowstone in one go. Especially because since Chicago that they don't manage to do that.

The hotel they book in is in front of Liberty Park and they get two rooms again: Eleven and Will in one, and Lucas, Dustin and Mike in the other. Because it's already late, they ask the receptionist for recommendations for eating out and choose the least expensive one. That's how they end up eating pasta at a Italian restaurant.

"It's not bad, but it also isn't the best thing I have eaten on this trip," says Eleven, after finishing her gnocchis, "I give it a 6.5."

"Well, the sauce in my fettuccine was delicious, so I give it a 7.8," says Mike.

"Pfft. You two wouldn't difference a rotten tomato from a good fileto. This sorrentinos are clearly a 9.4," says Lucas, because he *really* likes it and his friends are ignorant on the matter.

They walk back to the hotel and Lucas can see the awe in Mike's face every time he looks at Will. Which is always. Does he really need to interfere? Apparently he does, because his friends are a bunch of idiots. Himself included.

"Hey, Mike, can we talk?," he asks, slowing down. Mike looks puzzled at him, but also slows down.

"Yeah, sure. What happened?"

"Uh, nothing happened. I mean, something happened but, ah..."

How does he have this conversation now? It was easier with Will. Why was it easier with Will? Oh, right, Will started teasing him about El. Wait, that's actually a good idea.

"It's about El," he says, and he knows he's blushing. Judging by Mike's grin, his friend also noticed.

"Oh, really? Please, do tell."

Lucas buffs, flustered. "Shut up. I just wanted to... you know, like, ask you if you were okay with... maybe... I mean, I'm not sure what she would answer, but... ah, uh..."

"Yeah?," says Mike, his grin widening by the second.

"Uh, if you're okay with me asking El out," he says at least, his voice barely audible and his cheeks burning.

"Of course I am!"

"Shhh!"

Mike giggles, "sorry, but it's totally okay! I mean, you didn't need my blessing to start with, but you have it anyway. Besides, I don't like Eleven in that way anymore, so it's not like I'm going to be jealous or something."

Lucas smiles and then takes a deep breath. It's now or never.

"Awesome. And sure, of course you don't like Eleven anymore, right? I mean, you like Will now..."

Mike goes so fast from smiling to panicking that Lucas wants to kick himself. He told Eleven he's not good talking about feelings! The thing with Will was clearly a fluke.

"W-what?"

"I mean... uh, ah..."

By now they have stopped, but Dustin, Eleven and Will are so immersed in the talk they're having, that they already are almost a block ahead of them and didn't realize it. Mike looks as if he's about to faint and Lucas like an idiot.

"Look, sorry for saying that if you don't... you know, like him. It's

just...,” he starts saying, not sure of where he’s going, “I mean, I thought that... but if you don’t... I mean, to me it would be totally cool because I think you guys would make an awesome couple and... uh...”

Mike looks at him with big eyes and they stay in silence for a few seconds.

“I... do. I do like him.”

Lucas sighs in relief and smiles.

“That’s amazing.”

Mike gives him a weak smile.

“It’s just that I don’t know if he... if he likes me back. I mean, lately he has been a little more... *handsy*... but I don’t... I’m not sure if he... does. Like me.”

“Look,” Lucas says, trying to sound calming, “the first time you kissed Eleven, did you know she liked you?”

“Uh, what?”

Lucas rolls his eyes, “It’s an easy question, Wheeler. Back then, the first time you kissed her, did you know she liked you?”

“Uh, no, I didn’t.”

“Well, here’s the same thing. Will won’t stop being your friend if he doesn’t like you back. Sure, maybe things would be awkward for a few days, but the kind of friendship you two have doesn’t disappear overnight. Again, look at you and Eleven: did you two stop being friends just because you broke things off?”

Finally, Mike smiles, “No, we didn’t.”

“There you have it. You’re never going to know if he likes you or not if you don’t ask him. Besides, don’t you think he deserves to know the truth?”

“You’re right,” sighs Mike, starting to walk again. “Have you been talking with Dustin about this? Because he told me something similar something like two weeks ago.”

“No, I haven’t. But, uh... Eleven and I might have been talking about this...,” he admits and Mike chuckles.

“Aww, look at you two, already plotting like an old couple.”

Lucas rolls his eyes.

“Please, if there’s a married couple within us that would be you and Will. ‘Oh, Will, you’re such a good artist’, ‘oh, thanks, Mike, you’re an incredible writer’, ‘oh, Will, lets elope and have lots of baby comics’,” he mocks in a overly sweet voice and Mike laughs and pushes him.

“You’re such an ass.”

“Hey, you two!,” yells Dustin, “what’s holding you two back?! Hurry up, guys, or we’re leaving you!”

“Coming, coming!”

When Mike wakes up the next day, he’s decided. He has been dancing around the issue for months now, but he has made a choice.

However this turns out, he is sure of what he’s gonna do.

They get breakfast at the hotel and then they go to the Utah Museum of Fine Arts, where Will parrots about all the different artist on display and what cultural movement they’re from. He looks absolutely excited to be here and Mike just wants to hold his hand.

After coming out of the museum, they have a quick lunch at a little café and then they go sightseeing around the city. They go walking around Temple Square and they take photos outside Salt Lake Temple and at the Eagle Gate Monument. They walk and walk, going into gift shops, taking photos in the street, laughing at everything and nothing at all.

By the time they go back to the hotel it's already nighttime and their feet hurt a little for walking so much. They grab something to eat in their way back, so by the time they reach the hotel they're ready to go back to sleep.

When they're a couple of feet away from their bedroom doors, Mike takes a deep breath and talks.

"Hey, Will, can I talk to you for a sec?," he asks, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible when he's actually screaming in his own head.

"Sure," says Will, and they all stop, "What happened?"

"Actually, uh, will you come with me to the roof? The receptionist said there's a great view of the city from there."

"Oh," says Will, and behind him Dustin, Eleven and Lucas gasp in anticipation. Mike blushes and he wants to kill his friends right now. "Um, sure. Let's go."

They take the elevator to the roof in silence and Mike can feel his own hands sweating. Oh, God, he's going to do this. He's really going to do this.

"Wow, the view *is* pretty from here," says Will, once they reach the top.

"Yeah."

That's the last thing either of them say for a long while. Will looks at the wide view of the city as if he wasn't waiting for Mike to tell him what's happening, and Mike has suddenly lost the capacity of talking and thinking, so he's looking for what to say.

After a couple of minutes, there's a blow of a light breeze and Will shudders. He hasn't brought a coat or a hoody, so Mike takes of the jacket he has tied to his waist and gives it to him.

"Thanks," says Will, smiling, "I always forget how prone I am to getting cold. I'm lucky that you always have an extra coat or jacket."

"Yeah, well, I know you. And I don't want you to be cold."

“My hero,” says Will, and then, “what did you wanted to tell me?”

Mike takes a shaky breath. It’s now or never.

“I... I wanted to talk to you. About... about something. About... us,” he says and, oh, God, he already started, he can’t look at Will in the eyes and he can’t also stop now. “I... I like you. Like... like you-like you,” he says, and then laughs, nervously, “of course that like you-like you. I wouldn’t have brought you here if it wasn’t like that, right? And... and I sometimes... sometimes I feel like there’s something between you and me but I don’t know if it’s something that I stupidly believe, some wishful thinking or if it’s really there.

“And I wanted to know,” he continues, still not watching at Will, “... I wanted to know if maybe you also like me. If you... if you would want us to be something more than friends. If you would want to be my... my boyfriend. I know... I know you have problems. I’m not saying you don’t, and I’m not saying I can solve them. I don’t want to change you, I like you how you are and I... I *do* want you to feel better, to don’t feel so bad all the time to... to help you feel better. But it’s not... God, I know things don’t suddenly get better with something as stupid as a true love’s kiss, but I want to be there for you.

“I want to be the shoulder you cry on and the lips you kiss and to hold your hand. God, I want to hold your hand so bad,” he laughs, fighting back the tears. “And I feel so stupid, you know? Because I do... I do think of other things. Of things less... less PG-13,” he says, like and idiot, “but what I want most is not those things but... but to hold your hand. To cuddle with you in my bed. To caress your cheek and... and build a life with you. I want the good and the bad and the ugly. I want everything.

“Because I know you’re not perfect. You hate making choices, even if it’s something as basic as to pick where we eat. And you’re super smart but also leave everything to the last second. Like, seriously, how do you manage to maintain a 4.0 GPA when you do everything last second? And... and objectively I know there’s people more beautiful than you, but when I look at you I can’t help thinking you’re the most stunning human being in the whole Earth. You’re gorgeous. I know it sounds shallow, but when I think of you that’s the

word that comes to my mind. Because you're beautiful on the inside and the outside. To me... to me you're gorgeous."

When he stops talking he feels breathless. He has poured his whole heart for Will to see and now he feels exposed. He feels nervous and at peace at the same time. Whatever Will says... now he knows.

When he looks up, Will is looking at him with big and watering eyes.

"Gosh, Mike," the boy says, his voice cracking a little and Mike's heart clenches because Will is smiling when he talks, "the only thing you needed to do was asking me out, but I'm not going to lie: I'm so glad you always say everything in your mind."

Will gets closer to him, extending his hand to Mike and now he too feels like crying. From relief, from happiness, from so many emotions he doesn't know what he's feeling anymore.

"I have loved you for so long," Will admits, squeezing his hand, "And I'm a mess and I... I sometimes think it wouldn't be fair for you or for me, but... God, I don't want to deny myself things anymore."

"So...", Mike says, his heart in his throat and he's sure his heart skips a couple of beats when Will laughs happily.

"So yes. I do want to be your boyfriend."

When they kiss, there's no fireworks or bells or corny music playing in the background. It's not Mike's first kiss, nor the second or the third. This is not a fairytale, because fairytales don't exist and they know that better than anyone. But, when they finally kiss... when they finally kiss is *amazing* because it's them, and that's enough to be perfect.

They take the elevator back to their bedrooms floor giggling and barely being able to see anything but the other. Mike walks Will to his door and, when they open the door, they're not surprised at all discovering their three friends sitting in Eleven's bed, watching expectantly at them.

Mike smirks, "Well, see you tomorrow, Will," he says, and then he gives his *boyfriend* a peck on the lips that is more sound than kiss.

Will giggles and Dustin punches the air, while Lucas and Eleven start screaming, grabbing Will and Mike inside the room and closing the door before someone complains.

“Fucking finally!,” shouts Lucas pushing Mike onto the bed and then they end up in a tangle of limbs and bodies, the five of them laughing.

Mike doesn’t know if he’s going to be as happy as he is now again: here, with his boyfriend and his friend, the family he found all on his own.

Full of love.

The first thing that Will thinks when he wakes up the next morning is that he kissed Mike Wheeler multiple times the night before. The second thing he thinks is that the bedroom is too bright.

“Wiiiiiill, please turn it off,” groans Eleven from the other bed, hiding his head under her pillow.

The third thing Will thinks is that, apparently, when he’s too happy he puts lights to their maximum power.

“Sorry, sorry,” he says, but he can’t help the grin in his face.

Given that he generally doesn’t use his powers, he doesn’t has a great control over them, so it’s a little hard to power down the lights. He does, though, so he feels really proud of himself.

Huh, that’s new.

“Thanks,” says Eleven, and then goes back to snoring.

Seeing Mike is strange and amazing and Will becomes a giggling mess as soon as they’re face to face. Mike is blushing hard, too, and they hold hands all the way down to the first floor.

“Please, tell me you’re not going to be one of those couples that are all over each other all the time,” says Lucas, trying to sound

disgusted but being betrayed for the fondness in his voice.

Mike snorts and rolls his eyes, “I don’t think we can be. But, even if we could, I’m not that into PDA. Holding hands is cool, though.”

What Mike says is right: they can’t be as coupl-y as Mike was with Eleven, for example. He doesn’t know about Salt Lake City, but at least in Hawkins things wouldn’t be as bright if people saw them walking hand in hand down the street.

It’s a little sad, but he’s not going to cry over it. The most important thing is that he has Mike, and his friends, and he’s going to have his family when he comes back home. And, as Mr. and Mrs. Miller were able to be together no matter what people and the law said, they’ll also find a way.

After having breakfast they go to the Natural History Museum of Utah, where Will and Mike hold hands when nobody is watching and sneak glances at each other. Okay, maybe they kinda are one of *those* couples. He doesn’t know, they have dated for less than a day, they’re still trying to find their place with each other.

At one point they sneak to the restroom and Will catches Lucas rolling his eyes. He giggles while the two of them get into restroom and lock the door. Mike is grinning so widely his cheeks might be hurting, but the boy hugs Will around the waist, bringing them closer.

“Hi,” Mike says, bending a little so they’re face to face.

“Hi,” Will answer, smiling too and hugging Mike back.

They kiss for a couple of minutes and the lights shine, bright, and Mike ends up laughing and blushing.

“Will!,” Mike says, and he sounds awed and Will just now realizes how truly in love he is.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Will says, laughing and trying to turn the lights down a little.

“It’s okay,” Mike says and he sounds so fond and he’s looking at Will

in such a way that the only thing Will can do is kiss him again.

When they go back to their group, Eleven is smirking at them and Dustin makes a gesture with his eyebrows that makes Mike roll his eyes and Will start giggling again.

“Thank God you two are not one of those couples, right?,” mocks Lucas, and they end up chasing each other and almost getting thrown out of the museum.

They go to watch *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* at Villa Theatre, where Mike and Will take advantage of the dark room to kiss some more.

“Don’t turn up the lights,” Mike mumbles against his lips at some point and Will goes back to giggle.

“Shhh,” Eleven shushes, throwing popcorn at them.

After the movie (which, to be honest, Will just saw half of it), they buy some junk food and go back to their hotel rooms to have dinner. They eat in Mike, Dustin and Luca’s room and Will is seated in Mike’s lap the whole time and this is so surreal he’s almost afraid of being hallucinating again.

“This is so weird,” says Dustin, at some point, “I mean, it’s cool. But so weird.”

“I think they’re cute,” says Eleven, biting her hamburger.

“I think they’re cute too. A little overly sweet, but cute,” says Lucas.

“You guys remember we are here, right?,” asks Mike, amused.

“So weird,” repeats Dustin, smirking.

They decide to go to sleep early, because the next day they have to keep driving to Las Vegas. Mike walks Will to the door and they kiss a little more there, until Eleven comes out of the room, snorting.

“You’re in love, we get it. Now go to sleep!,” the girl says and then she grabs Will into their room.

When he finally gets in his bed, Will is smiling. He is still fucked up, his problems hasn't banished. He will probably have nightmares, if not today, tomorrow or the day after that. He still is scared of his powers and just dares to use one of them.

He has friends, and family, and a boyfriend. He is not alone. He will never be completely sane again but he finally discovered that's not a bad thing.

Dustin's Amazing Checklist - Ranger Edition

°At least four changes of underwear

°Shampoo

°Machete

°At least three t-shirts

°Sleeping bag

°Brass knuckles

°At least two shorts

°A formal shirt (just in case we have the opportunity to have dinner at a fancy restaurant)

°A formal suit (see above)

°Formal shoes (see above)

°Gel (seriously, man, you don't need that crap, but whatever)

°At least one cap

°Sunglasses

°Nunchaku (I still think they're useless, but I know you're going to be mad if you forget them, so. Here they are)

°Swimsuit

°Pijama

°At least two pair of pants

°Sneakers

°Two books that you have not read yet

°Three cassettes with whatever music you want

°Snacks (it can't be those disgusting candies you like)

°A water bottle

°Cards

°Your Dungeons & Dragons costume

"There. I checked the list: everything is in the suitcase. Happy now?," Lucas asks Dustin.

"Of course I'm happy. Do you know how upset you would have been if you forgotten your nunchakus here?"

Dustin is right, but Lucas rolls his eyes anyway for good measure.

"Hey, lovebirds, have you two done your suitcases?," Dustin asks Will and Mike, who are making out in Mike's bed.

Mike gives them a thumbs up and Will giggles and somehow they don't stop kissing. Damn horny teenagers.

"How is it that they went from being blushing messes unable to admit their feelings to making out like Gomez and Morticia Addams?"

"Joke's on you," says Will, breathless, "we're still blushing messes."

Mike laughs and the two of them go back to kissing. Lucas tries to look done a little longer, but he's actually so happy his friends are together that he can't keep the smile out of his face for too long. Even though they keep making out all over the place and it's kind of bothersome.

They have breakfast at the hotel, fill the truck's tank and then they're off to Las Vegas. It's a six hour and a half trip and they plan to make it in one go.

Lucas is supposed to drive the first two hours, with Dustin as his co-pilot, but Eleven complains that Mike and Will are being gross next to her, so they set up a rule that says Mike and Will can't ride in the backseat at the same time anymore.

"Objection, your honor!," protests Mike, making Will giggle.

"Overruled," Lucas says, solemnly, and Eleven sticks her tongue at the lovebirds.

At the next gas station they have lunch at the adjacent dinner and Lucas is pretty sure Mike and Will are playing footsie under the table, but he doesn't want to find out.

Eleven drives for the next two hours, with Will as his co-pilot. In the backseat, Mike convinces Lucas and Dustin to help him serenade Will and it's one of the cheesiest things they've ever done, but Will is happy, and Mike is happy, and Lucas smiles while he sings out to tune of *You are so beautiful*.

They're laughing and about to change drivers again when they almost hit an eight feet two-headed monster and everything goes to hell.

9. Chapter 8: For the future

Notes for the Chapter:

OMG, I can't believe this is already the last chapter! Sure, we still have the epilogue left, but still! Thanks to everyone who ever left a comment: they mean a lot to me and they help me to get better and to be strong to keep writing.

Is the chapter's title a reference to *Free!*? Why yes it is, because again I suck at titles.

Will screams while next to him Eleven hits the brakes. The truck wriggles, but they manage to stop and with the reflexes that experience builds, almost all of them are out of the car in seconds.

All of them except for Will, of course. He's freezed in his seat, scared as every time they're face to face with a monster.

And this isn't a monster like the ones they have back at Hawkins. This one is big, eight feet or more, with two faces full of teeth. It's full of hair and it has a long tail, and claws in its catlike paws. It's something like they never seen before and he doesn't have a clue how they're going to defeat this.

Why did he thought that they would be able to be safe and happy for so long?

Frozen in his seat, Will watches everything like in a distorted movie through the windshield.

Mike has his gun out and is shooting at the monster, but the bullets doesn't seem to affect it. Dustin tries to distract it while Lucas runs towards it with his machete in hands, but when he tries to cut it the machete bounces back and he ends up in the floor. The monster roars, angry, and with one of his big paws throws Dustin across the street.

"Dustin!," he hears Mike say, as his boyfriend runs to their friend.

“Everybody, behind me!,” yells Eleven and she has her back to Will, so he can’t see her face, but the monster starts to twist and convolve, so she must be using her powers.

For a moment it looks like she’s going to bring the monster down, but then it roars again and Eleven screams, only barely standing on her feet. The monster is still contorting and it looks angry, fighting Eleven back. Will can sense its bloodthirst and he knows that if they don’t kill it now, it will kill them.

Will never fights. He’s always too scared, too overwhelmed to fight. Until this trip, he never used his powers outside the lab and even there it was only when the doctors made him use them. The only reason he has a knife is for self defense and the one time he tried to use it he ended up hurting himself.

Will is tired of feeling useless.

“Hey, you!,” he shouts, getting out of the truck.

The monster roars at him and Will runs towards Eleven. She’s tensed, her hands clenched in fists, trying to keep the monster at bay. She’s fighting hard, all of them are.

And so is Will.

He closes his eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath. He can do this, he can. He’s not going to let his monsters and his own fears control him anymore. He’s the one in control now.

When Will opens his eyes, plants are growing fast at the sides of the road, thick branches extending towards the monsters, surrounding it like a vice. The monster screams and fights back, but so do Will and Eleven.

“Will!,” Mike yells, running towards them, helping a limping Dustin.

“Eleven!,” Lucas shouts, also running to them from the other side.

“We can do this,” says Eleven though her teeth, taking Will’s hand.
“We’re stronger than it.”

Mike, Dustin and Lucas finally reach them and Will feels Mike taking his other hand. They can do this.

“We are stronger,” he repeats and just like that his plants close completely over the monster as Eleven finally breaks its neck.

They’re silent for a moment. The only sound he can listen to is their own shaken breaths. The whole thing mustn’t have lasted over ten minutes, but he feels exhausted.

“You did it,” Mike tells him, awe in his voice.

“We did it,” says Will, and he is crying but this time he is not sad or scared at all.

“That was awesome!,” yells Dustin and Will laughs and the five of them end up hugging and jumping.

“How are we going to clean this thing?,” wonders Lucas, helping Eleven stand upright.

As if on cue, five black cars come from ahead of them and four from behind. They’re surrounded and they don’t have any good experience with that many black cars, so even if they’re tired they stand in a fighting position.

The cars stop a feet away from them and from one of them a white woman comes out. She’s tall and has gray hair and she’s wearing an uniform they are very familiar with. The woman smiles at them and Will can feel she isn’t dangerous to them, but that doesn’t make him less wary.

“Well, hello there,” says the woman in a thick southern accent, “You must be Eleven, William and their friends. I’m Agent Sally Carson. Dr. Grantt and Dr. Ackerman told me you were going to drop by. It’s a shame we met in such awful circumstances, but thank you for your help. May I offer you a ride?”

“Do we have an option?,” says Dustin.

Agent Carson smiles.

“Of course you do.”

Next to him, Eleven sighs.

“Yeah, we don’t mind a ride.”

Agent Carson’s people end up towing the truck, while they ride in a van with Carson herself. Eleven feels tired and sleepy and she snuggles against Lucas, who hugs her. Dustin is dozing off against Lucas’ other shoulder and in the row behind them Mike and Will are sitting in a tight embrace.

“Where are we going?,” Eleven asks.

“To our facilities,” Agent Carson says. “They’re a few miles away from Las Vegas. And once again, thanks for helping us with that situation.”

Situation. Right.

“What kind of monster was that?,” Mike asks, “We haven’t saw anything like that in Hawkins.”

“Yes, I figured,” Agent Carson says, “The subjects you have faced are all from another plane, if I’m not wrong. Sadly, this ‘monster’, as you called him, it was an experiment gone wrong. We wanted to take a couple more test on it, but I guess it’s best from everyone you have gotten ridden of it.”

An experiment gone wrong. Lucas takes Eleven’s hand and she clutches it. An experiment gone wrong, just like her.

If Agent Carson notices how tense they are, she doesn’t say anything.

They ride in silence for the rest of the journey and when they get to the facilities Agent Carson mentioned before, they’re guided to her office. It’s a big one, with two big sofas and four chairs in front of her desk.

“Make yourselves comfortable,” the woman says, smiling at them.

The five of them sit in the same couch. They're cramped and she's almost sitting in Lucas' lap, but they don't care. They don't want to be even an inch apart of each other here. Agent Carson finally notices their discomfort and sighs, sitting down too.

"Right. Sybil and Cecil told me you didn't like us much."

"Can you blame us?," says Eleven and she feels Lucas squeezing her hand.

"I guess I don't," admits the woman. "I'm not going to retain you here. I didn't lie: we are really glad you got ridden of the subject. Sybil and Cecil told me you have some problems controlling your powers, but I'm going to tell them I saw you two using them just right. As a form of gratitude, I would like to offer you to stay with us as much as you like, but I'm sure you'll want to decline my offer."

"You're a smart woman," Lucas grumbles, still hand in hand with Eleven.

"But I'm still grateful, so I'm going to talk the best about you to Sybil and Cecil. You would be glad to know that they're thinking about giving you two more freedom, even the chance to leave Hawkins for longer periods of time."

Eleven is the one to squeeze Lucas hand this time. It's hard for her to trust this people, especially this woman she doesn't know anything about. But the promise of actual freedom fills her with hope.

"Thanks," she says earnestly.

"Nothing to thank. I wouldn't do it if I didn't think you two are capable of controlling your powers. So, as the five of you don't want to stay with us, please let me pay for your hotel in Las Vegas."

"Really?," says Dustin, surprised.

Agent Carson smiles.

"You don't have an idea how dangerous that subject was, how much trouble it brought us. You're heroes, kids. So yes, we want to offer you to pay for your sleeping arrangements in Las Vegas. It's the less

thing we can do. And don't worry: we are going to put you somewhere nice."

Dustin looks at everything with big eyes, but refuses to say anything while Agent Carson is still with them. Looking at his friends, he can see them in similar positions, all looking stiff and with incredulity in their faces, but trying to hide it. If Agent Carson's amused smile means anything, they're not that good yet at hiding how they feel, but the woman doesn't comment anything, so Dustin gives her a point. Well, half a point: he still doesn't like her.

"You can stay here until you resume your journey. All the hotel's amenities and facilities are at your service, with the obvious exception of the casino. For everything else, you can wander and use everything here under your account. And if you need anything, or change your mind and want to expend a couple of days with us, here's my office's number," says Agent Carson, given them a card. "If there's nothing else I can do for you today, I'll be leaving. Once more, thank you for your help."

With that Agent Carson is out of the suite. They wait in silence almost for a minute.

"Oh, my Gooooooooooooo!," shouts Dustin, throwing himself in one of the couches. "This is the freaking Caesar's Palace!"

Lucas starts laughing and Mike and Eleven run off in opposite directions, each one going to a different room to lurk out. Will just looks at everything with big eyes, gaping like a fish.

"The bedrooms are *huge*, guys!," yells Mike. "Like, this bedroom is bigger than my *living room*!"

"This lounge is bigger than my *house*," mutters Will, still amazed.

"It has a kitchen!," shouts Eleven. "And it has fruits!"

Lucas laughs, "Fruits? This lounge has a billiard table! And a huge TV!"

“So big...,” mutters Will, still glued to his spot.

“And it has a balcony!,” says Lucas, opening the glass door to the balcony and stepping outside.

“So comfy...,” sighs Dustin happily, still on the couch.

“Guys! Guys, come out here!,” yells Lucas, “You need to see this!”

When they step outside, Mike and Dustin start laughing. Eleven claps and Will still gawks like a fish, all of them looking at Lucas, who has a big grin on his face.

“A jacuzzi!,” says Eleven, still clapping.

“Oh, my God, such a beautiful view,” says Will, going to the edge of balcony and resting against the railing.

Below them the city shines with the buildings and the cars’ lights. It’s already late and they’re tired and hungry. They drove for hours, fought a monster, went face to face with an agent from an agency that has caused lots of problems to them and with who they’re kind of allies and now... Now they’re in Las Vegas. The Sin City, the City of Lights.

By this point they’re probably just running on adrenaline, but Dustin feels so excited he doesn’t care about how tired he truly is.

“This is amazing,” he says, going next to Will to admire the city.

“Yeah,” says Eleven, and Dustin almost feels how her smile disappears, “almost too good to be true...”

They’re silent for a moment, and then Dustin sighs.

“You’re right. There must be a catch.”

“Should we go?,” asks Lucas, reluctant, “This place looks amazing, but I don’t trust these people.”

“Agent Carson seemed truthful when she said she was in debt with us, but...,” starts Will, but Mike interrupts them.

“No,” Mike says, firm. They turn to look at him and he looks decided, “We’re not going to do this.”

“Mike?”

“We’re not going to be paranoid, watching behind our backs all the time. The whole point of this trip was to have a good time and not be worried about monsters and government agencies all the time, and we’re going to keep it that way. We’re going to stay here, we’re going to enjoy our days in this city, and we’re not going to be making conspiracy theories at all hours.”

“But, Mike, these people...,” starts Lucas, but once again Mike stops them.

“I know. I’m not saying we should trust them blindly, or to become their best friends. They’re still not the good guys. But if they wanted to hurt us, or trap us, or anything, they would have done so when they had us in their headquarters. So let’s take this while we have it. We deserve this.”

Dustin hears Lucas sigh.

“You’re right. If they wanted to do something to us, they wouldn’t have let us leave their headquarters.”

Mike smiles, “exactly. So, can we have fun?”

Will smiles, too, and he goes to Mike’s side. Will gives the boy a peck and the lips, making him blush, and then he turns to them.

“Let’s have fun,” he says, and Dustin grins.

“Aww, look at them, so couply together,” he coos, making Will roll his eyes.

“I say we go to one of the hotel’s restaurants and make those assholes pay for a lot of food,” proposes Eleven.

“Hell, yeah! That’s my girl!,” shouts Dustin, making everybody laugh.

This may seem unbelievable, but they’re not letting anyone rain on

their parade. Not even their own fears.

“Stop making out in front of us!,” yells Lucas, throwing one of the couch’s cushions at Mike and Will, who laugh and get up.

“You’re just jealous,” says Will, sticking his tongue out at him.

Lucas just rolls his eyes, “Just go and make out in the balcony under the stars.”

“Oooh, that’s totally romantic! Let’s go, Will!,” Mike says, excited, taking Will hands and running to the balcony.

“Did someone slip alcohol in their drinks?,” asks Eleven, giggling.

“Man, I think they’re just drunk in *loooooove*,” says Dustin, and the three of them laugh.

They’re lying on the floor, talking and laughing about nothing and everything at once. Lucas feels happy and drowsy, too tired to get up and go to one of the beds. They haven’t arranged who sleeps where yet, but he has a feeling that tonight they’re all sleeping in the lounge. Hell, even the floor is comfy here!

Eleven giggles at something Dustin says and Lucas turns his head to look at her. She’s a few inches away from him and she looks soft and sleepy, her eyes half lidded. Her cheeks are flushed for laughing and her short hair is going in every direction. She’s beautiful in every sense and Lucas feels like a lovestruck puppy.

“I’m hungry,” Dustin says, getting up.

“How can you be hungry? We eat tons of food!”

“Well, I’m a growing boy. I saw eggs in the kitchen, someone wants scrambled eggs?”

“I pass,” snorts Lucas, and he can hear Eleven laugh.

“Your loss!”

Lucas go back to looking at Eleven, who is looking at him. She smiles.

“Hi,” she says, almost in a whisper.

“Hi,” Lucas says, heart fluttering.

They stay like that for what seems like an eternity, the both of them sleepy and smiling at each other. They’re so close that Lucas can count the small freckles in her face.

“You know,” says Eleven, her voice still low. She sits up a little bit, just enough for her face to be above Lucas’, “I think Mike and Will were kind of dumb. I mean, I get why it took them so long to confess, but still. I never want to be like them, dancing around the issue for months or *years*.”

“Yeah,” it’s the only thing Lucas can say, his heart beating fast.

Eleven cheeks are flushed but this time Lucas doesn’t think it’s for laughing.

“You’re really pretty,” the girl says and Lucas is not surprised when she bows down and kisses him on the lips.

It’s soft and it isn’t either of them first kiss, but Lucas is sure his heart skips three beats and he feels capable of doing everything.

“You’re pretty too,” Lucas whispers against Eleven lips, sitting up too.

They kiss two, three, four times. He feels his cheeks on fire and his brain fuzzy.

“Do you wanna go out?,” Eleven asks, a shy smile in her face.

Lucas giggles, happiness bubbling inside of him. “That’s a solid yes. Shouldn’t I be the one asking you out?”

“Why?,” laughs Eleven and it sounds like music to Lucas.

Gosh, he’s already a sap.

"I don't know. Stupid traditions, I guess," he says, and then they're back to kissing.

For what seems like hours, but it can't be more than five minutes, it's just the two of them in the whole world. Eleven holds his face like it's something delicate and precious and Lucas puts his hands on her waist, holding her softly.

He's young and he is in love and he takes back everything he once said about stupid romantic movies.

"Hey, not to brag, but this eggs are... Holy shit! Oh, my God! Mike, Will! Holy crap!," Dustin yells, scrambled eggs flying to the floor and Lucas and Eleven separate laughing.

"What?! What?!", Mike yells, running into the lounge with Will on tow.

Dustin is jumping and pointing at Eleven and Lucas, who can't stop laughing, "Lucas and Eleven! Lucas and Eleven!"

"What happens with Lucas and Eleven?!"

Just because Mike sounds scared and Will *looks* scared, Lucas winks at Eleven and takes her hand, intertwining her fingers with his. He then raises their joined hands, showing them at their friends, who take a couple of seconds to understand what's happening.

But when they do, though, Mike starts throwing cushions at Dustin.

"You asshole! I was scared! I thought something bad had happened!"

"Oh, God," says Will, clutching his chest and looking relieved. "Dustin, don't do that again!"

"Guys, guys! Ouch! Wait, Mike!," says Dustin, still jumping and trying to avoid cushions, "Guuuuys! I'm sorry! But Lucas and Eleven!"

Just then it looks like Mike and Will process what's really happening, because they suddenly jump and look at them, grins on their faces.

“Oh, my God!,” says Mike.

“Lucas and Eleven!,” adds Will.

As if on cue, their three friends run towards them and suddenly Lucas and Eleven are in a human pile, her friends trying to hug them at the same time but ending up just doing a human ball. Lucas can’t stop laughing, back again against the floor.

He and Eleven are not like Mike and Will. They haven’t been secretly in love with each other for years, didn’t have a heartfelt love confession under the night sky. They’re not star-crossed lovers, or a princess in distress and his knight in shiny armor. They’re not what romcoms are made about.

But, holding Eleven’s hand under their excited friends, Lucas is sure he wouldn’t trade the relationship they had for any other one.

“You know? I have reconsidered things, and I’m not sure this was a great idea,” Dustin says, frowning at his friends.

They ordered room service for breakfast and now they’re sitting on the lounge’s couches, eating the delicious food. Or at least *he* is eating the delicious food, he is pretty sure that what his friends are trying to eat is actually each other’s faces.

To Dustin’s right, Will is sitting on Mike’s lap (apparently, his new favorite seat), his fingers tangled behind Mike’s neck while Mike’s fingers are drumming against Will’s hip. They’re making out, of course, something that they can’t seem to stop doing these days.

To Dustin’s left, Eleven and Lucas are cuddling, sharing small kisses and giggling. Lucas feeds Eleven strawberries in between kisses and they’re being so overly sweet Dustin is about to thrown up. Like, for real.

He groans.

“Guuuys. Come on!,” he is ignored, so he groans again, “I didn’t thought about the full consequences of this.”

“Aww, Dustin,” coos Eleven, finally pulling away from Lucas’ lips for more than five seconds, “Are you feeling lonely? Don’t worry, you’re going to find someone soon.”

“Ugh, no thanks!,” he says, and Mike and Will finally honor him with their attention.

“You’re jealous,” says Mike, sticking his tongue out at him.

“Uh, no-oh. Totally not. Like, for real. I mean, don’t get me wrong. I love you guys and I’m happy for all of you, seriously, but we’re seventeen. I don’t plan on getting married as soon as I leave high school. I want to live my life, you know?”

Eleven laughs, “Dustin! We’re not going to get married as soon as we leave high school... We’re going to wait, like, six months, at least.”

Lucas laughs and he and Eleven kiss and Dustin is currently hating his friends and thinking about getting new ones.

“You’re all crazy,” he says.

“Don’t say that, Dustin! We know you love us,” says Will.

Dustin sighs dramatically, “Yes, I do. That’s my doom.”

“Aww,” coos Lucas, and then, “human pile!”

“No, no, wait!”

It’s too late, of course, and all his friends end up on top of him, trying to hug him and laughing. He laughs, too. This people *are* crazy, but so is he. And he knows that he’s always going to love them.

Even if they’re two gross couples.

They’re five days at Las Vegas, but to Mike time seems to fly by.

They mostly stay at the hotel, enjoying all the things it has. They watch movies, relax in the jacuzzi, play in the pool, take sunbathes in

the balcony. It's like sleeping in an amusement park. Probably what Mike do most, though, it's make out with Will, to Dustin dismay.

Will and Mike make out in the huge beds, in the couches, in the jacuzzi, against the kitchen counter. He's pretty sure they have make out in every surface of the suite. When they're outside they can't be this affectionate, but inside their suite the most dangerous thing is Dustin groaning and throwing a pillow at their heads.

They do go outside, though. They go shopping to the Bonanza Gift Shop and to the Fashion Show Mall. They walk through the Las Vegas Boulevard, take pictures of all the bizarre things they catch, and they even go to a museum once.

One day they even met up with Agent Carson to have lunch together. It's weird and they're all kind of tense, but Carson thanks them once more for their help and tells them she already talked with Grantt and Akerman about how helpful and collected they were.

But, yeah, mostly they stay in the suite. Partly because there's not much to do in Las Vegas if you're under 21 (even less if you're under 18) and partly because it's nice being just the five of them.

On their last night in Las Vegas, they get loaded with food and watch a movie snuggled against each other in the suite's lounge. Will is cuddled against his chest and Mike's own head rests in Dustin's thigh. Eleven is seated on Lucas laps, who has his head rested in Dustin's shoulder.

"Guys?," says Dustin, his voice groggy, at some point.

"Yeah?"

"I love you. You're the best friends in the world."

Mike smiles, fondly.

"You're the best friend in the world, too."

"Let's be together forever," proposes Eleven, yawning.

"To the end of time," says Will.

“And even after,” adds Lucas.

“Always,” says Mike.

They’re more than friends, they’re more than family. They’re life partners, no matter what role they occupy in each other’s lives.

They fall asleep like that and when morning comes, Mike thinks a sore back is worth it just for being able to wake surrounded by the most important people in his life.

“Oh, my God. Ooooh, my God.”

“Lucas, breathe.”

“Oh, my Goooood.”

Eleven giggles and squeezes Lucas hand. They have their Dungeons & Dragons costumes and the San Diego Convention Center looks gigantic around them. There’s people everywhere around, almost all of them in costumes too.

Since they arrived fifteen minutes ago, Eleven has counted three Batman, two Captains America, four Spider-Man, two Wonder Woman, one Scarlet Witch and another Jean Gray. Or Dark Phoenix, Eleven isn’t that much a fan of the X-Men to notice the difference.

“Did we die and went to heaven?,” asks Dustin, awe in his voice.

“Somebody pinch me, I think I’m dreaming. Ouch! Will, it was just a turn of phrase!,” complains Mike, rubbing his arm while Will laughs.

They bought passes for two of the three days of the Comic Con, and they’re staying in a cheap motel near the San Diego Convention Center. Yesterday they drove all day and managed to get to San Diego in one go, to everybody’s surprise.

It’s a shame the trip is almost ending, because they’re getting good at it.

“Oh, my God!,” yells Lucas once again, tugging Eleven’s hand, “It’s Stan Lee! Let’s ask him for a photo! And an autograph!”

To their joy, they manage to get a photo with Stan Lee. Actually, they manage to get several photos with Stan Lee: an individual one for everyone and a grupal one. Dustin seems like he’s about to wet himself for excitement the whole time and Will looks simply shocked.

After going to Art Adams’ panel they start walking around the convention center, checking the stands, buying comics, taking photos.

Eleven buys Lucas a big poster of Nightwing to hang in his bedroom and her boyfriend tells her that he is thinking about moving the wedding forward to just four months after graduation, at which point Dustin throws an empty Coke can at them.

At some point they lose sight of Mike and Will and don’t see them for almost half an hour. Lucas starts to get worried, but they finally reappear, the both of them flushed and giggling and it’s so obvious they were making out that Dustin throws a paper bag at them.

“I hate you all so much.”

On their second day at Comic Con, they go to a Dungeons & Dragons panel that has the five of them excited, taking photos and writing down everything. They get a picture with the panelists and then another one with various groups of people in costumes, just like them.

They run into Jack Kirby and the man accept to take a photo with them, but just one because he’s in a hurry. Will seems like he’s drooling about the man and Mike says that he might be jealous.

“Mike, he could be my grandfather!,” says Will, laughing.

“So what? Maybe you have a thing for grandfathers.”

“Oh, yes, that was a hell of a hot grandfather,” jokes Eleven, making Will laugh even harder.

They walk and walk for hours and when they finally get back to the motel, they sit in silence on their beds for a while.

“I can’t believe it’s over,” she says, finally.

Next to her, Lucas nods, “I mean, we were on the road for over a month just for the Comic Con and it the blink of an eye it’s already over.”

“We weren’t on the road for over a month just for the Comic Con,” says Mike.

“Uh, yes we were?”

“No, we weren’t,” repeats Mike, smiling. He has his chin hooked on Will’s shoulder, who is once again seated on his lap, “We were on the road for over a month to be away from Hawkins. That was the whole point. The Comic Con was just a place to get to, remember? The point was to be together and as far away as possible from home. To have fun, to enjoy our summer.”

Eleven smiles, resting her head on Lucas’ shoulder. That’s true. They did this for Will. And for them, too. The Comic Con was awesome, but it wasn’t the most important part.

Still...

“Are you going to get all corny and sappy on us now, Wheeler?,” she asks, mockingly, and across the room Dustin snorts.

“Aww, Mikey, do you love us?,” Dustin asks, and then makes some kissing noises, “Will might get jealous!”

“You wish,” snorts Will, sticking his tongue out at him.

Mike rolls his eyes, but he is still smiling.

“You’re a bunch of dorks.”

Dustin’s Amazing Checklist - Bard Edition

⁹*Brush*

⁹*At least four changes of underwear*

°Shampoo
°At least three t-shirts
°Sleeping bag
°Sunscreen
°At least two shorts
°A formal shirt
°A formal suit
°Formal shoes
°At least one cap
°Sunglasses
°Swimsuit
°Pijama
°At least two pair of pants
°Knife
°Sneakers
°Two books that you haven't read yet
°Three cassettes with whatever music you want
°Snacks
°A water bottle
°Dungeons & Dragons costume
°Check that all my friends have checked their checklists

Dustin nods to himself, closing his suitcase. They're leaving San Diego and, while this was supposed to be the last stop, they're going to one more place before starting the journey back home: San Francisco.

Mike hasn't told them yet what he likes so much about San Francisco, or why it's so important to him. He promised that he will tell them once they get there, so they take his word and stop asking questions.

It's an eight hour trip, so they decide to have lunch in San Diego and then drive all they can until night falls, then stay the night in a road motel. They eat in a greasy dinner some even more greasy hamburgers and then they hit the road.

The first couple hours of the journey Mike drives, Will as his co-pilot. Dustin would complain about getting stuck with another saccharine couple on the backseat, but he's actually a romantic at heart, so he

lets it slip. Unless they start making out, of course, that's where he puts his foot down.

It's actually cute when he catches Will taking Mike's hand over the gear lever. He hopes that doesn't distract Mike for driving, though.

They spend the night at a motel in a town called Patterson, which is less than two hours away from San Francisco, so they don't need to wake up disgustingly early in the morning to get there.

The room they get has two beds and a couch. Eleven and Lucas sleep in one of the beds and Will and Mike in the other. Dustin, to be honest, deserves to be recognized by all the Churches in the galaxy as a saint. They should name a town like him. San Dustin. Yes, it sounds good, and California seems to adore saint towns.

He hears giggling and sheets ruffling all night, but fortunately he doesn't hear any sexy noises. He did remind his friends that in his bag are condoms, lube, and other sex related items, but they all seemed extremely flustered for the mere suggestion of it, so Dustin doubts any of them might have sex while he is in the room.

The following day they get a delicious breakfast at a nearby coffee shop and Dustin reminds his friends about the cooking book/travel journey/pick your own adventure book that it's obviously going to make them rich.

"Who would buy it?," asks Eleven, sipping from his black coffee. Dustin doesn't understand how can she like that. "To get rich we would need people to actually buy the book."

"Well, our parents would buy it. I think. And Hopper. And mister Clarke! Maybe he can make it a mandatory book for his students."

"I highly doubt it."

"Boo, you're buzzkill!"

They sing to the radio until they reach San Francisco and once again Dustin doesn't complain about being stuck with an overly cute couple in the backseat. If he thought being a third wheel sucked, being a fifth wheel sucks even more.

“But all cars have a fifth wheel,” says Mike, “It’s the spare tire!”

Dustin rolls his eyes, “Thanks, buddy, I feel so much better now. It’s nice knowing I’m a spare tire for you.”

“That’s not what Mike wanted to said,” says Eleven, pinching Dustin’s arm. “Each one of us is important. And you’re not a spare tire. Actually, you are not even a wheel, you are way more than that. You are the motor of the car. You are like, our voice of reason, our heart.”

“See? I told you that weeks ago!,” says Will.

“Yeah, you are super important, Dustin. We might be smart, but we are a bunch of idiots. You are the one who actually understands how feelings work,” adds Lucas.

Dustin’s cheeks hurt a little for smiling so much. It’s so cute when his friends get overly protective of his feelings and start reminding him how much they love him.

“Aww, guys. I know you love me, don’t worry. Beside, the only reason I don’t want to be a spare tire it’s because that would mean I’m something like the spare boyfriend in case anything happen to one of you. And, I love you, but I just want to be friends.”

Mike rolls his eyes and Lucas and Will start laughing, while Eleven shakes her head. He loves these dorks and no matter where this or any other journey takes them, he always wants them to be by his side.

It’s sunny when they reach San Francisco. Mike parks the truck in Castro street and they get out of the car. He feels his hands sweaty and he knows it’s dumb to feel nervous, but he is. He can see rainbow flags hanging from the showcase of a couple of stores and he knows that Will has saw them too.

“Well, here we are in San Francisco,” says Dustin. “Want to tell us what’s happening now?”

Mike takes a deep breath and nods.

"This is Castro District," he says. "It's known in San Francisco as... as the gay district," he blushes when he says so, because he's still not used to say it out loud, even though he isn't sure that word completely applies to him. "And the reason why I wanted to come here is... well, I think the title explains it all, right?"

Will looks with big eyes around and his friends look surprised.

"Oh," is the only thing Eleven says.

"Yeah."

"There's two men holding hands," whispers Will and sure enough, across the street are two men not much older than them holding hands and talking.

Mike can't imagine that happening in Hawkins.

"I thought about San Francisco because... because lots of reasons, actually. This... this is one of the things. I want to be able to hold Will's hand in public and... and this place isn't perfect for what Nancy and I investigated, but..."

"Nancy helped you research this?," Lucas asks, eyes big.

"Yes," Mike answers, a small smile in his lips. He has an amazing sister, "She helped me look for places where we could go. A place where people were more open minded, even if it's just a little bit. Cities with colleges and schools and places where we could build our lives. Places as far away from Hawkins as possible. Will, in San Francisco there's the California College of the Arts. They have filmmaking and illustration there," he says, taking Will's hand in a public place for the first time, "And there's other colleges too. And Oakland and Berkeley are nearby if the options around here doesn't suit you," he says to his friends. "And... and I know we haven't been talking about all this leaving Hawkins together for long, but... But I have been thinking about this for more than a year and I wanted... I just wanted to let you know."

When he is finished talking, he feels a little out of breath, but Will's hand is a steady pressure grounding him to heart. His friends are

smiling at him and he doesn't really know why he felt so nervous about telling them this, but now that he said it, it seems ridiculous.

"To everyone who ever said your big head is just full of hair: they're wrong. There's a big heart there too," says Dustin, solemnly, and Mike can't help laughing, relieved.

"Sounds like you thought about this a little bit, didn't you, Wheeler?," says Lucas, smirking.

"Yeah, you could say that. Just in my free time, when I wasn't killing monsters."

"Okay, new plan," says Eleven, taking Lucas' hand and Dustin arm as the five of them draw a circle together, "We come back to Hawkins, we convince Grantt and Ackerman of letting us study elsewhere and then we came here and see what the 90's have in store for us. Sounds like a plan?"

"Yes, ma'am!," shouts Dustin.

"One for all, all for one!," says Will.

"One for all, all for one!"

Mike laughs and the five of them are hugging in the middle of the sidewalk in a strange city far away from home, but it doesn't matter. They're going to always be the weirdos of Hawkins, but that isn't important either.

Whatever they do from now on, whatever the future has in store for them, Mike knows they're going to make it. It doesn't matter if they move to San Francisco, to another city or if they end up stuck in Hawkins. For better or worse, whatever happens, he is always going to have this: his four best friends with him, watching his back while he watches theirs.

He couldn't wish for anything else.

10. Epilogue: A New Hope

Notes for the Chapter:

THE FINAL IS HERE.

Before starting, I want to say a couple of thigs. First of all, I want to thank a couple of people:

_ Thanks to OTPGOD1, who left a comment in EVERY chapter when they were posted.

_ Thanks to Isabelle, Olsulor11, cute_lil_fluff, CathryneMoon and iolaus1024, who left comments in various chapter and who also were with me along this trip.

_ Thanks to EVERYONE that left a comment, even if it was a small one. I think I responded to all of them, but if I didn't answer yours, thanks anyway, because I ream them all and they mean a lot to me.

_ Thanks to those that doesn't dare to leave a comment, but who left kudos anyway. Yes, comments help me a lot, but a good ol' kudos it's also good.

This fic is really important to me, because I wrote it after a long time not writing a thing. I wasn't sure if I would be able to finish it, because I tend to abandon things when they start getting hard, so finishing it was a way of proving myself that I can actually get things done. It doesn't matter if that thing is writing a fic, finishing a degree or writing a book: I can do it and so can YOU.

This fic was self indulgent from the very beginning, but I would lie if I said I'm not glad so many people

liked it, or that I wasn't eager and desperate for receiving a comment (or ten, or a hundred). As a friend told me: we write for ourself, but that doesn't means we don't want to be appreciated for it.

And finally, to my 8th grade English teacher who said I would never be able to understand or write in English: CHUPALA, MISS CLAUDIA, ESCRIBE MUCHAS PALABRAS EN INGLÉS Y SON SEMI ENTENDIBLES.

And now with the epillogue :) (and yes, the Epillogue title is taken out of Star Wars because nerd)

It's dark in Hawkins' forest. Shadows pool around the trees, creating a sea of blackness that grows by the second, swallowing everything in sight. There's no sun, no moon, no stars. There's nothing but darkness and a freezing cold that goes directly to your soul.

He closes his eyes and tries to think of something else, but it's scary in here. He's alone and not at the same time. The trees are dead, the flowers are dead. Is he dead?

No, he isn't. He is very much alive. He tries to remember that and even though he knows he can't escape from here, not yet at least, he has to remember he *is* alive. Beside, if he were dead he wouldn't notice how alone, how *scared* he is. He wouldn't feel cold and he wouldn't feel pain.

Is he in pain? No, he isn't. Not anymore, but it hurts. *Everything* hurts. Being alive hurts. The darkness filters through his body and he should be dead, but he is not.

No, that's wrong again. He shouldn't be dead. He doesn't deserve to die. He is good and he is worth it and he is alive. He shouldn't be dead, even if sometimes, like right now, that idea still creeps in the darkest corners of his mind.

A chilly breeze goes through the trees, but their leaves don't move. He doesn't run, not anymore. He knows how this goes and even though he is scared, he starts a steady march towards his destination.

Finally, he reaches the lake. Its water is dark in a way water shouldn't be.

He approaches the shore and the water is like a dark mirror, but it's not Will Byers who the reflection shows.

It's the Demogorgon.

When Will finally wakes up, he feels his heart beating hard in his chests, like every time he has a nightmare. Especially *that* nightmare.

He yawns and turns in bed without opening his eyes, moving towards the warm body next to him. He doesn't have to move a lot, though. Their bed isn't that big, even if he sometimes feel like it is after a particularly bad nightmare.

Mike is snoring softly, his face mashed against the pillow. Will slips under Mike's arm and snuggles against him.

"Mike," he whispers, nuzzling his nose against Mike's neck, who grumbles, "Mike."

"Aah? Wha?," Mike babbles, barely awake.

"Nightmare," he says.

"C'mere, shh," Mike says, still not completely awake but so used to this by now that he knows what to do even asleep.

Mike hugs him tight and Will sighs contempt against his boyfriend's chest. Mike is back to snoring in mere seconds and Will laughs softly, feeling already a lot better. He knows he's not going to be able to go back to sleep, but he doesn't feel paranoid or lost, so he doesn't care. Little more than a year ago he would have been collapsing in his bathroom, so he can live with insomnia every once in awhile.

Sometimes he still can't believe how much everything changed, and how much also stayed the same. He rests in Mike's arms lazily until the sun raises, letting his mind wander about everything and nothing at all.

They have been living in San Francisco for over a month now. Mike and he are studying at the California College of the Arts while Eleven, Lucas and Dustin are studying at the San Francisco State University.

The five of them are renting a small house (a really, *really* small house) with two bedrooms, an open kitchen, a bathroom and an attic. It's not cheap, but it's also not expensive and they have to thank Mr. and Mrs. Miller for this, because their daughter Ella put them in contact with two of her friends, who were looking for someone trustworthy to rent their house to. Lucas and Eleven are sleeping in the attic, while Dustin took one of the bedrooms and Mike and Will the other.

His mother, Jonathan, Nancy and Steve came to help them move in and also to spend a week on vacation with them. His mother hadn't take vacations in a long time, so it was good for her. She gave them a coffeemaker as a housewarming gift and Eleven and Mike almost shed tears of happiness when they saw it.

Jonathan, Nancy and Steve gift them with a cutlery set that at first they thought was a lame gift, but soon realized was actually needed to eat, so in the end it was much appreciated.

Those weren't the only housewarming gifts, though. His mother brought with her gifts from other people, and it wasn't until then that they realized they weren't as alone as they thought in Hawkins.

Hopper send them a tool box, as well as written instructions on how to fix some basic things. Mr. Monroe and Joe Higgins, Will and Eleven's old bosses, gave them a frying pan, a can opener and a kettle. Mrs. Maraoki send a cutting board, cooking knives and a cookbook with recipes that they could actually make without blowing up their house. Mr. Clarke gave them a cooking set, with oven mittens, a spatula, a wooden spoon, and other cooking related items.

"If you didn't notice, we're all afraid you're going to die of inanition," joked Steve at the time, seeing as the vast majority of gifts were kitchen related.

Mr. and Mrs. Miller also sent them a gift, and thankfully one that wasn't meant for the kitchen: a painting of an old castle that Mrs.

Miller painted herself. It's a beautiful paint and in some way it makes the house more homey.

Agent Carson, whom they have to go and see once a month for a routinary check, lend them a car so they could travel around the city. They have use it just once and it was to go to their monthly check, because they didn't want to take the train. Dr. Grantt and Dr. Ackerman sent them a microwave and it sat still in its package for two weeks, until they recognized that it was a practical thing and started using it.

Even their neighbors, a couple named Sarah and Annette, gave them a housewarming gift: a basket with eggs, milk, sugar and other basic ingredients and food. Because apparently they're totally rocking the broke ass college students look and every adult wants to make sure they're eating well. Last night Adam, the neighbor across the street, brought them "leftover pie", which was actually an entire pie.

Even though they have been here for just a month, those little things are what's helping them transform this house into their home.

Will likes his home.

Around seven in the morning he hears someone, probably Lucas, climbing down the stairs. Although today is Sunday and none of them have school or work, they're already used to getting up early.

Lucas is working on a library a couple blocks away from the house, while Will and Eleven serve tables in the Café at the corner of their street. Dustin is working at a book shop and Mike at an art supplies shop, both of them in the back street. None of their jobs are going to make them rich, but it's enough for keep on living. Besides, none of those jobs require a lot of hours, that's enough to like them.

When the smell of fresh coffee starts to fill the air Mike finally wakes up, nuzzling his nose against Will's hair and making him feel happy and safe.

"G'morning," Mike mumbles, giving him a sleepy smile.

"Good morning," Will says, smiling back.

Their lives are not perfect. Even though they're not as many as before, Will still has panic attacks and doesn't control his powers at 100%. Mike hasn't talk with his parents since before they moved out, Eleven still has issues regarding Terry, Lucas doesn't talk with his parents either, and Dustin sometimes gets tired trying to keep them all up.

But they're better than they were before and they're together. They're still young and strong. They are breathing and they are alive.

They're a family and nobody ever is going to bring them down.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks to everyone for reading! Please leave a final comment if you want. And remember you can talk to me in my tumblr: <http://kikinuinthefandom.tumblr.com/> (because I'm feeling lazy and don't want to check again the external url html tag).

Keep on being amazing :)

Author's Note:

Come and scream about Stranger Things and Yuri on Ice with me in my [my tumblr](#) :)